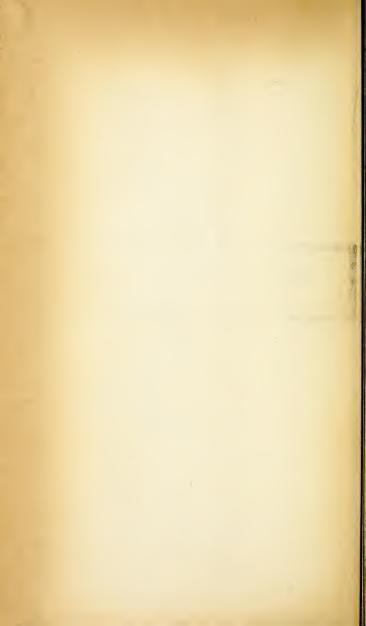
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The Hunter and the Horns

W. H. Canaway

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The Hunter and the Horns



'TAKE a look, Teacher,' Danvers said, handing him the binoculars.

Parsons stood up in the convertible, holding the big 35 X 60's, fiddling with the centre focus, then looking where Danvers was pointing. Danvers was sitting in the driver's seat with Marietta beside him, and Parsons noticed wryly that Danvers already had one hand on her knee, while he pointed through the windscreen with the other.

'Take a good look,' Danvers said again.

The heat haze shimmered liquid over the gravel. Parsons could see nothing, and already his hands were beginning to shake from the strain of holding the binoculars. He got out of the car and knelt by a front wing, resting the glasses on its burning upper surface, shifting his hands out of contact with the metal.

Marietta clucked impatiently, and jerked her knee away from Danvers' hand.

'Hurry up, can't you?' she said. 'I'm getting barbecued.'
Parsons gasped, exclaimed.

'You see it?' Danvers asked.

He saw it, milk-white, radiant, inexpressibly lovely. It stood motionless on the gravel desert, one forehoof slightly advanced, slightly lifted, the head with the wonderful tall tapered horns alert and turned towards the car, which must have appeared as a mere dot to its sight.

'God!' said Parsons.

'The Arabian oryx,' Danvers said. 'Take a real good look. Soon you won't see any more, Teacher. Pity.'

He yawned, teeth strong and white against the mahogany face, which never went red and scaly like Parsons', then he lighted a cigarette and blew smoke at the flies.

'Let me see,' said Marietta suddenly.

Reluctantly, Parsons stood up. The gravel had been hurting his knees, and the hot metal burning through his shirt-sleeves, but he handed the binoculars to Marietta with a sense of regret.

'Where is it?'

She was resting the binoculars on the windscreen; she had taken off her sunglasses and her eyes were screwed up against the dazzle.

Parsons thought with surprise that she looked momentarily like a gnome.

'There,' he said testily. 'There. No, no, over there.'

'I can't see a thing. Oh, blast, now it's all out of focus. I can't see anything at all. Wait a minute.'

Parsons fumed while Marietta refocused the lenses.

'Do hurry,' he said petulantly. 'I want to have another look.'

The girl cried out, 'Oh, now I see it! But it's lovely.' 'It's doomed,' Danvers said. 'Doomed.'

'Oh, I think it's wonderful!' Marietta breathed. 'How can anyone want to shoot a creature like that?'

'Marietta,' said Parsons, with as much authority as he could summon up. 'The binoculars.'

After all, she was his lover. She gave him the binoculars, and he set the focus again.

Danvers said, 'Our eyes, they must be all to cock. Or your eyes. Mine are okay, I'm sure of that.'

Parsons groaned, 'Oh lord, it must have gone. I can't see it anywhere. You have a look, Danvers.'

Danvers scanned the desert.

'It's gone. We'll go home too. C'mon.'

Parsons got into the back seat again, weary and disappointed. A fleeting glance, that was all he'd had, just a fleeting glance.

Marietta swung over the front seat and joined him with a flash of brown leg and thigh.

'It's cooler in the back,' she said, 'Danvers' little paw is very hot.'

Danvers yawned again, started the motor, and drove off, making a quarter-mile U-turn. They all felt cooler as the breeze of travel began to evaporate the sweat from their bodies. As soon as it was comfortable enough to do so, the girl snuggled against Parsons, and he stroked her bare arm while Danvers watched sardonically in the rearview mirror. Parsons saw that he was observed, and his hand jumped as though burned by a sudden cigarette-end. Anyway, he recalled, he was angry with Marietta; it was just that the proximity of her flesh had driven his anger out of his head for the time being.

'A fleeting glance,' he said bitterly, as much to himself as to her. 'That's all I had. Why did you want to take the binoculars? You're not interested in the oryx. Not really interested, I mean. It was just curiosity, and you spoiled it all for me.'

'Oh, diddums?' said Marietta and then smiled. 'Forget it, sweet. You'll see plenty more.'

'You heard what Danvers said. Doomed, that's what they are, doomed.'

Danvers was driving in overdrive fourth, sixty miles an hour on the gravel. Parsons sulked, jouncing with the pitch and roll of the soft suspension.

'We shan't be long at this rate,' said Marietta. 'Oh, I'm simply longing for a swim at the club.'

'Air-conditioned life!' Parsons said. 'Why I came out here I don't know. Canned, air-conditioned existence, that's all. When you see something like that oryx it makes you realize.'

They were reaching a point where the gravel desert narrowed a little. Away to their right lay the silverwhite aluminium sheeting of the sea, and to their left, six or eight miles away, the foothills of the high dunes reared in blinding waves above the heat-shimmer.

'Look,' said Parsons. 'The fringe of the Empty Quarter. That's where I'd like to go.'

'All that sand. And why the Empty Quarter, anyway? This bit isn't so full. A swim. . . . We'll dance afterwards, and then on to my place. Not too late. And you won't drink too much, will you?'

'Thousands of square miles of it, there must be.' And then, as he looked at Marietta, his mood changed and he responded to the invitation. But why can't women be open about things? he wondered. Disregarding Danvers' eyes in the rear-view mirror, he leaned towards Marietta, slid his hand inside her shirt, and fingered her breast. 'No,' he whispered, 'I won't drink too much. And, yes, we'll swim and dance afterwards, and then . . .'

He whispered in her ear.

'Don't,' she said. 'Don't be disgusting.'

* * *

Marietta lay passive but complaisant while Parsons made love to her hygienically in the hygienically airconditioned bedroom of her oil-company bungalow, and uttered small sounds of pleasure from time to time. Then, later, after showers and a nap, Parsons rolled away from her and sat on the edge of the bed, listening to her steady breathing. After a while he walked naked into the kitchen, found a bottle of whisky, and half-filled a tumbler, topping it up with soda water and two large cubes of ice from the refrigerator. He drained the glass quickly, said, 'Same again, I think' and took the second drink back to the bedroom, which was stale and dim, faintly illuminated by the kitchen light now, but hitherto dark; for Marietta preferred love in darkness.

A year ago the very idea of drinking whisky in a woman's bedroom would have appalled Parsons. But he

felt that he had acquired sophistication more quickly, really, than Marietta. What a name! She should have been called Susan, or Cicely, or something like that: something out of the Betjeman belt transplanted to the tropics and making a late, somehow half-hearted flowering. He finished the drink and leaned over Marietta, shaking her gently till she awoke.

'Oh no,' she groaned. 'Leave me alone. Must sleep.'

'Listen,' Parsons said urgently. 'I want to talk to you. It's about that oryx. I don't think you understood what I was getting at.'

Marietta sat up, frowsty and sweaty.

'Go home, John. It's late. Do go now.'

She rubbed her hair, then ran her fingers through it.

'Lord,' she said. 'I feel a wreck, honestly.'

Parsons said, 'They ought to be protected.'

'What ought?'

'Why, the oryx.'

Marietta sighed, and said, 'I'm the one who needs protecting. Now get out, darling, will you? Think what might happen if the father of one of our dear pupils saw you leaving my place so late.'

Parsons put on his shirt and said, 'Don't worry. They

know all about us, you can bet. Little bastards.'

He spoke affectionately, not noticing Marietta's shock.

'You mean they know?'

Parsons nodded casually.

'Expect so. They know everything that goes on.'

'But, John! What must they think? Oh . . .'

Marietta was wide awake now. Parsons kissed her shoulder, and fastened his belt.

'They envy me, I shouldn't wonder. But I don't know; their tastes run more to fat.'

'I'll never be able to face them. Never!'

'Darling, don't dramatize,' Parsons said. 'This isn't Cheltenham or somewhere like that. This is the Treaty Coast, remember? You're always telling me that when

you're busy reminding me I haven't been out a year yet. Now to get back to these oryx——'

'How can you talk about damned antelopes? I have to teach general science to those kids in the morning. I can't do it. John, what shall I do?'

'Teach them general science. That's what the company pays you for. You do that, while I teach 'em English. And don't worry; they know as much about life as you ever will. More, probably. It means something to them. Or meant something before the company got its hands on their dads and turned the kids into boy apprentices.'

He buckled his sandals and stood up.

'I won't sleep a wink,' Marietta said, dolefully.

Parsons kissed her on the forehead, and said, 'Well, I'm off. See you in the morning. 'Night.'

He left her sitting up in bed and let himself out walking through the singing heat of the night back to his own bungalow, feeling tired and a little drunk but knowing that he would not sleep for a long time on account of the oryx.

* * *

The class watched him silently and intently. It was the last period of the morning. The pencils had slid to a standstill, and the lean brown claws of the Arab boys rested unmoving on the desks. They were waiting for Al Muktibbun to fall asleep.

Parsons was marking exercises, and nodding over them. He had thought that teaching abroad would be more exciting than teaching at home; but it wasn't, and marking was even less so. He always felt sleepy while he marked exercises, despite the air-conditioning. The bright black eyes watched as he dozed.

'Do you think he will fall off the chair?' Bin Hubara asked in a whisper.

Sahail Ahmed murmured, 'If God wills it. But he will be very angry if he falls off. Do you remember last time? By God, I thought he would burst!'

Bin Tahai said, 'By God, yes. But Al Muktibbun has been working hard all night. A man needs rest. If he is going to fall off the chair we may perhaps wake him?'

'It may be that we shall wake him in time,' said Sahail

Ahmed. 'I would not fancy her myself.'

'No, by God,' said Bin Hubara. 'But it is a great saving. He pays her nothing.'

'Look,' said Bin Tahai. 'Al Muktibbun is going to fall off the chair.'

The class watched.

'Yes,' said Sahail Ahmed. 'If God wills it he is going to fall off the chair.'

Parsons fell off the chair.

* * *

Parsons sat in the company club and talked with Danvers. They drank canned American beer—light, gassy, and without body. On the oil-rigs a man needed thirty pints of liquid a day to offset dehydration, and most of the field-workers carried their drinking habits back to the Coast with them. Parsons co-operated as far as he was able, but ten or twelve cans of the icy fizz was about his limit. After that he drank whisky.

'We're lucky,' Danvers had said once. 'North, in Kuwait, and over in Saudi Arabia, you can't get hard liquor at all. Same goes in the south, in Oman.'

'How's that?'

'Some of these Muslims, they're pretty fanatical. You know, Wahabis and that. And they hate our guts. You ever known what it is to be really hated—not because you've done anything, but just because you're you?'

Parsons hadn't known at all, but had nodded sagely. That had been six months before. Now, with his first

tour of duty almost over, and annual home leave in sight, he felt as though he had been years in Arabia.

'Funny thing happened today,' he said to Danvers, looking up and watching the silent fans like aircraft propellers in the ceiling. 'Queer. I went to sleep in class, and fell off my chair. God, I was raving!'

'Huh?' said Danvers, not really interested.

'What's funny about it, I fell off this chair, and they must have been watching me all the time.'

'That's natural enough,' said Danvers. 'Anything for a laugh. Goddam it, you were a kid yourself not so long

ago. So they watched you fall off a chair.'

'Yes,' said Parsons earnestly, 'but that's it. They didn't laugh. They all crowded round, asking if I'd hurt myself. And I'd swear they were serious, you understand—as if they genuinely wanted to know. Same thing happened about six weeks ago. Yes, I'm sure they were serious.'

He thought a moment, then added, 'But I'm not sure they were concerned one way or another, really. They just wanted information. It's an unnatural reaction.'

Danvers said, 'Yeah. How's about another drink?'

They drank bourbon.

Parsons said, 'You're local personnel man. Tell me, who is Sahail Ahmed?'

'Why?'

'Another funny thing. After the last lesson he came up to me. He said, "If you wish to see the oryx properly you must go right into the desert. You should meet my uncle, Khalid bin Zaglul."

'The hell he did?' Danvers was surprised. 'Khalid's his uncle? I never knew that. Sahail Ahmed's father is a Coast Arab.'

'Well? Who is this other chap?'

Danvers said, imitating Parsons' English turn of phrase, 'This—uh—other chap is a big bug. Sheikh Khalid bin Zaglul, uh? Big casino.'

'A sheikh?'

'Sure, well sheikhs are a dime a dozen here. But this one's different. Spends a lot of time on the Coast. He ought to: we pay him royalties. Sahail Ahmed must be his nephew on the wrong side of somebody's sheets or he sure wouldn't be in apprentice training school. Khalic has three big autos in town, and a whole tribe of people and camels in the desert. He spends a lot of time out there, too. Say, where's Marietta?'

'She'll be along,' Parsons said absently. 'Do you mean this Khalid lives in the Empty Quarter?'

Danvers snorted.

'You want to get this Empty Quarter nonsense out of your head. It's just a lot of sand, and no water. That's why it's empty. Most of it's Saudi and Omani country, anyway. You ever go in there you'll be in trouble.'

'But it has been explored.' Parsons protested.

'Oh, sure. Gallant English guys on camels getting all set to write books about the romantic desert, and a few poor American bastards looking for oil. Arabia Felix, the ass-hole of the world.'

Parsons dropped the subject. Then he cleared his throat and said, 'One other thing, Danvers.'

'What is it?'

'Marietta. Why don't you leave her alone? She's my girl, you know.'

He felt desperately embarrassed, but he went on, while Danvers watched him sidelong, impassively.

'I've—well, I've noticed on a number of occasions that you've—well, made a pass at Marietta. It's not quite the thing, I mean. Dammit, you're a friend of mine, Danvers, and you've been very good to me, and I don't like having to bring this matter up, but I had to speak out, you understand.'

That was really nineteenth century, he thought. Still, it had needed saying, and was better said.

Danvers said, 'Think nothing of it, Teacher. It's the climate, see? I'm not on any soft limey contract. I haven't

been home in two and a half years. I need a piece of real American tail, boy, and once in a while I just can't keep my hands to myself. It doesn't mean a thing.'

Parsons said contritely, 'I'm sorry, Danny. Of course I

understand. I was a fool ever to think---'

'Okay, okay,' Danvers said. 'Buy me a drink.'

The bar began to fill, and soon music throbbed from the ballroom. The oil-company men and their wives, the many bachelors, and the few unattached women drifted into the ballroom, leaving only a knot of hard drinkers at the bar counter.

'When I go on leave I'm going to Fawley,' Parsons said, 'to see the cat-cracker.'

Danvers said, 'You stay away from our competitors. Cat-cracker, that's quite a word. I'm a cat-cracker. I'm the greatest goddam cat-cracker in the world, but I haven't a cat to crack.'

'Here's Marietta,' Parsons said suddenly.

She stood a moment, looking round the room, and then came across and joined them. She looked cool and dark in a navy silk dress, and was wearing a thin gold chain round her neck, with a pendant fire-opal.

The men stood up, and Parsons seated Marietta.

'Drink?' Parsons asked her.

'Lager, please, John.'

Parsons went to the bar for it, shoving through the boozers, as he called them in his own mind.

One was saying to another, 'Yeah, fact. Colour TV in every bedroom ceiling. You should see it, fella.'

The other said, 'I bet he never seen it, less he got eyes in his ass. That TV in the ceiling, that's strictly for the ladies to watch. I don't just like Texans, colour TV in the ceiling or no colour TV in the ceiling.'

The first man said, 'Yeah, me too, but that ain't relevant. I'd give a lot to even be in Texas. They're human.'

'You said it, not me.'

Parsons took the lager back to Marietta.

'It would have been just as quick to let the waiter bring it,' he said. 'Here it is, anyway.'

She sipped and then said, 'I'd like to dance.'
'Oh God,' said Parsons. 'Please, no. Not yet.'

Marietta said, 'Oh well, if you won't Danny will. Won't you, Danny?'

Danvers said doubtfully, looking at Parsons, 'Well, yes. If you're positive——'

'I'm positive.' said Parsons. 'Go on. It's all right.'

They went into the ballroom. For a moment Parsons wondered whether he should go and watch the dancers, and particularly Danvers and Marietta. Then he decided against it. After the conversation with Danvers it would look like spying. Still, he hoped he could trust Danvers.

The oryx was becoming an extinct species—the Arabian variety, that was. It was being shot out of existence. Few white men had succeeded in shooting one, Parsons had been told, though the bedu in the interior hunted oryx constantly as a source of meat and a symbol of manhood. How could one persuade them that this was wrong? Parsons asked himself, and knew no answer. But he knew also that the oryx was hunted for sport, or for what passed for sport. The coming of the oilmen to the Coast had placed enormous wealth in the hands of rulers and sheikhs of the grander sort. Though many clung to ancient customs, they embraced Western products which did not conflict with those customs, and Parsons had seen what could be done on the gravel desert with an automobile. Distance could be eaten up, and hunting grounds reached with little difficulty; add half a dozen sportsmen to the car, equip them with modern hunting rifles and telescope sights, and the already low game stocks of the Arabian peninsula bade fair to disappear already.

He had known all this in theory, and it had troubled him as a fervent opponent of blood sports at home. The first sight of the oryx itself, its purity and grace, had driven a fact into his fancy; and this troubled him even more deeply.

Parsons walked shakily to the bar, and perched on a stool.

'Bourbon,' he said. 'On the rocks.' He turned to the man at his side and said sternly, 'As a child, I dreamed of unicorns.'

'Yeah?' said the man. 'Personally, I dreamed of Hedy Lamarr,'

Parsons sighed, drank the whisky and went into the ballroom. The combination had just finished a number, and there was desultory clapping. Parsons gazed round vaguely, and then saw Marietta standing close to Danvers, one hand in his.

He suddenly experienced a sense of revulsion. Who was he to call the men at the bar boozers? He was as bad as they were. Hating the 'air-conditioned existence,' as he called it, he had none the less been accepting its values.

'The desert is here,' he said aloud, and one or two people turned to stare curiously at him. 'The real desert—why, it would be like an oasis after all this. An oasis.'

He walked over to Marietta and Danvers, and said, 'Do you know what? We're in the desert. This is the desert. Here, within. This is hell, nor am I out of it.'

Marietta said, 'Oh, John, you're sloshed already. It's too bad of you, really it is.'

Parsons leaned back on his heels.

'If I am drunk it is with a revelation.'

The music started again, and Parsons said, 'I don't want to listen to this muck. It must have been better before they allowed women here.'

Marietta said, 'Now stop being awkward. You'll have to get off the floor.'

Couples had begun quickstepping round the trio.

Parsons said loudly, 'Bloody muck!'

Heads were turned in their direction; heads with

scandalized or curious or expectant faces. Trouble? A fight starting?

Parsons, exasperated, shouted, 'I'm getting out of here,' and lurched away, blundering into a couple. He muttered an apology and made his way with difficulty through the dancers back to the bar-room, where he drank the rest of Marietta's lager and then left the club.

There was a vast moon in the north-eastern sky behind the hard black silhouettes of the oil-storage tanks. Parsons walked past the rows of staff bungalows, identical, four-roomed; past his own; past the executives' larger bungalows; past the administrative offices, the workshops, the school buildings. He went through the gate, off the settlement, and down the road in the direction of the native town and the port. He heard the roaring of the filtration plant grow in his ears, then diminish until it became once more part of the background; always it was there, but one heard it only occasionally with full consciousness. It growled incessantly, insatiably demanding oil to fill its miles of steel-pipe intestine. Then the roaring in his ears was the sea. He stood at the end of the moon's broad silver path, sniffing urine, excreta, decomposing offal. But, by God, he thought, at least the stinks were there, not deodorized into nothingness! He spat and turned south, mopping his brow, already thirsty again.

* * *

When Parsons shoved aside the bead curtain and looked into the café two score pairs of eyes swivelled in his direction and the buzz of conversation ceased, leaving the field to Cairo Radio. Parsons came forward into the smoky, low-ceilinged room, and there was a mutter from the men assembled there.

One of the men stood up. He was short and spare, with an almost black face, and the eyes and nose of a bird of prey. He looked at Parsons, and said incredulously, 'It is a Nazarene, God blind his eyes.'

The man stepped forward, his hand on the big Omani dagger at his waist.

Four bedu from the desert, rifles slung easily under their arms and resting on thigh and knee, watched impassively from where they squatted.

Parsons stayed motionless. The shock of stepping from the company club into this world of sudden fierce maleness rooted his feet to the floor. He was afraid, but kept still. It was like suddenly finding oneself in a cage of lions.

The man approached Parsons, who stared back at him, seeing the arrogant onyx eyes, the beaked nose, the sparse coarse beard, the seamed brow under the white turban.

Another man got up and spoke to the first, a hand on his shoulder, restraining him.

'It is the Muktibbun from the oil-company school,' he said. 'Come, it would be no honour to harm him.'

The first man rolled spittle in his mouth, deliberated, his eyes still on Parsons, then turned contemptuously and went with the other back to his place.

A negro slave came up, his hands together before him, and blinked inquiringly at Parsons, one wall-eye white and frosted by trachoma. For a moment Parsons wondered what the man wanted, for it had gone out of his mind that the place was a café. As a child he had been self-conscious and embarrassed about eating and drinking in public places, and as an adolescent he had often gone hungry and thirsty rather than enter a restaurant and eat alone with (as he had imagined) the eyes of countless self-assured adults upon him. This feeling returned now, intensified. He felt gauche, foolish: it was impossible to order anything, to take refreshment before the stony contempt and malice of these men. Bewildered, he turned and thrust his way through the cur-

tain into the street, making his way back to the settlement. The street was dark, and when he felt the hand on his shoulder Parsons whipped round with a gasp of terror, expecting death.

The Arab spoke soothingly in simple Arabic.

He said, 'I am Sahail Ahmed's father. Come, Muktibbun, I will walk with you. I was in the café.'

Parsons walked with the man, and said after a while, 'I should not have gone into the café.'

Sahail Ahmed's father said, 'No. You should not have gone in. Why did you do so?'

'I was thirsty, and I wanted to see an Arab café.'

The Arab said bitterly, 'Do you think we are animals for you to stare at?'

Parsons was taken aback. Haltingly, he tried to explain his motives for visiting the café. Sahail Ahmed's father seemed unimpressed, listening impassively.

He said, when Parsons had finished, 'But you have everything at the oil-company settlement, everything that a man could want. You have all manner of food and drink, and a woman. When the sun is hot you can make your rooms cool, and when it is cool you can make them warm. What more could a man desire?'

Parsons said slowly, 'I don't know. To be a man, perhaps.'

They walked in silence until they reached the gate of the settlement. Then the Arab said, 'Tomorrow evening you will come to my house and drink coffee. Sahail Ahmed will come and fetch you to show you the way.'

He waited for neither acceptance nor refusal, but turned and strode away down the road. Parsons went back to the company club, into the noise and fug. He drank a glass of beer, then looked for Marietta. She was nowhere to be seen; nor was Danvers. Parsons hesitated, and then left the club. He walked to Marietta's bungalow, and moved quietly up to the door. The front of the bungalow was in darkness, so Parsons tiptoed

round the path to the back. There was no light to be seen.

Parsons wondered where the couple could have got to. Perhaps they had stopped at Danvers' bungalow for a nightcap, he thought. Then, suddenly he heard Marietta's voice give a sobbing cry; there was silence; then, after a few minutes, Marietta's and Danvers' voices talking low. He heard water running, the chink of bottle on glass, laughter. When the front door opened Parsons remained at the back until the farewell kissing was over and Danvers' footsteps had died away. Then he went to the front door and rang, staring at the mesh of the flyscreen.

Marietta opened the door.

Parsons said, 'Surprise, surprise.'

She stood unspeaking, unmoving. He pushed gently past her into the bungalow, and at this she slammed the door, rounding on him violently.

'You beast!' she said. 'You filthy, spying beast!' and

passed him.

He followed her, but when she turned to go into the kitchen he said, 'What's the matter with the bedroom? Aren't we going in there?'

Marietta turned. She was wearing a wrapper with nothing underneath. Her lips were bruised and her face blotched.

'Why did you come to spy on me? Why?

Parsons said wearily, 'I wasn't spying. I just came here to find you because you weren't at the club.'

Marietta said, 'What do you expect me to do now? Fall on my knees and beg your forgiveness?'

'I'd rather you made some coffee.'

Parsons realized at once that he had said the wrong thing. Though he had not intended to be ironical at Marietta's expense, that was how she interpreted his remark.

'Get out!' she said furiously.

Parsons said, 'Oh, for heaven's sake. I really meant it: I would like some coffee. Please, Marietta.'

Her anger and defiance faded. She looked at him in puzzlement, and then made coffee. Parsons realized with surprise that he felt brotherly towards her, compassionate.

She handed him his coffee.

'Well?' she said hesitantly.

Parsons said, 'What am I supposed to do: throw a big scene? I can't dramatize things as you can. I haven't the talent for it.'

Marietta sat down, both hands round the cup, her elbows at her sides as though afraid her hands would shake and spill the coffee. She winced as the hot liquid touched her sore lips, then put down the cup.

'Oh, John,' she said, 'why did you have to leave me this evening? Why?'

'Would it have made any difference?'

Marietta said, rising and pacing about, 'You shouldn't have left me with Danny. You were cross and drunk, and I was angry with you, so I thought I'd make you pay for it. But I didn't mean . . . And then it was—too late.'

Parsons said, 'It's a bit of a mess, isn't it? You must hate me now?'

'Hate you? But why?'

'Look,' said Parsons. 'You think I ought to hate you because of Danvers. Therefore you blame me for it, and you hate me. That's normal enough. But I don't hate you. I'm grateful to you; you've taught me a lot.'

Marietta started to cry quietly.

'Don't cry,' Parsons said. 'It's all my fault. But is this Danvers thing going to be permanent?'

Snuffling, she said in a small voice, 'Oh, I have been a fool, John. I don't love Danny at all. What you must think!'

'I have had two revelations this evening,' said Parsons, 'and that's enough for any man. We'll let it ride, shall we?'

'John,' she said. 'Oh, John, you're a good man.' She hesitated, then came over to him and said, 'Stay if you like.'

He put an arm round her shoulders and said, 'No. That wouldn't work. We'll have to cry off; let things cool down a little. I'm going to be very busy with the oryx, anyway.'

'I see,' she said flatly. 'Very well. I'm in no position to argue.'

He kissed her gently on the brow, said, 'Don't worry,' and let himself out of the bungalow.

* * *

The pasture was lush and green, but as he looked at it he noticed a small patch of sand in the middle. On the sand was a white speck. The patch of sand began to spread, and the white speck grew, while Parsons realized that he had been far above it and was approaching it rapidly. The white thing was the size of a daisy, an egg, a dove, a swan. Then it was the oryx, Marietta riding nude on its back as it trotted beneath him. He heard Danvers' voice calling her, and she vanished, while the oryx stood still, and Parsons plummeted down, down, screaming, on to the rapier points of the creature's horns, to wake sweating and groaning, with a headache and a foul taste in the mouth.

* * *

At seven o'clock on the following evening Sahail Ahmed scratched at Parsons' door.

'Are you ready, Muktibbun?' he asked. 'My father has sent me to fetch you.'

They walked together towards the town, past the roaring filtration plant.

'This is very kind of your father, Sahail Ahmed,' said Parsons.

Sahail Ahmed was thirteen, and possessed the almost girl-like beauty of some Arabian youths before the sun has etched its signature on their faces. He wore a calf-length white tunic, but no headgear, and a small, plain dagger at his belt. He kept a hand ostentatiously on the dagger as he walked, half a pace to the rear.

'There will be several people taking coffee at my father's house,' he said. 'Please be careful, Muktibbun.'

'Careful?' said Parsons. 'What do you mean? How must I be careful?'

Sahail Ahmed said, 'Our ways are not the ways of the Nazarene. You will not be angry with me if I advise you?'

Parsons smiled. Sahail Ahmed was evidently concerned lest he should lose face if his teacher behaved disgracefully.

'Of course not. Please give me your advice,' he said solemnly.

'It is nothing, really,' said Sahail Ahmed. 'Do not talk too much. Your people make a lot of noise and chatter when you take drinks; my people do not. And you should take three cups of coffee, but not more than three. When the slave brings the coffee round after your third cup waggle the cup in the air, like this'—he demonstrated—'to show the slave that you have had what custom demands.'

'I see.'

'I do not know whether there will be any food,' the boy went on, 'but if there is use only your right hand. And you will have a chair to sit on—my father has three chairs—but whatever you do you must keep the soles of your feet on the ground. It is great dishonour to a man if you show him the soles of your feet.'

Parsons grinned.

'I will remember.'

The boy said earnestly, 'Yes, you must. There will be desert men at my father's house, and also, I think, my uncle the Sheikh Khalid bin Zaglul. They would not harm you under my father's roof, but the desert men would certainly kill you afterwards if you insulted them.'

Parsons said, 'You are joking.'

'No, Muktibbun, I am not joking. And, remember, my uncle has very great power. Even here, in the town, he could have men killed and the Sultan would say nothing. Out of the town the Sultan would know nothing about it, but even if he got to know he would do nothing.'

Though the sun was still very hot, and the temperature just on a hundred degrees, Parsons felt a sudden chill. This code of honour which demanded that an insult, even an unintentional insult, be repaid by murder, seemed more than a little forbidding, part of the ethos of the Heroic Age. Homer's Greeks would have behaved like that; so would the Vikings. He had never felt much kinship with either, but he told himself that this was because he had been reared in a sickly civilization, then squared his shoulders and walked more briskly, so that Sahail Ahmed had to hurry to keep pace with him. He would make an effort to embrace this alien world.

In the event there was nothing to embrace. They passed into the narrow streets of the native town, into the maze of shops and houses huddled together as if to crush the passers-by. Through the street along which they thrust their way ran an open drain. The Coast people moved at their leisure, in long tunics and turbans; the desert men moved like alert animals, passing from immobility to sudden motion, their rifles hugged in their right arms, flimsy camel canes dangling from the fingers of their left hands; ragged and black, they seemed as though of a different species.

Sahail Ahmed and Parsons squeezed themselves against the wall, constrained to wait as a string of camels lurched past to the *fondouk*, their drivers calling and cursing incomprehensively; the rank lion-odour of the beasts struck Parsons like a tangible presence. He and Sahail Ahmed went on. They turned down another street, at the end of which Parsons caught a glimpse of the sea in the gathering dusk.

'This is my father's house.'

Sahail Ahmed had paused outside a blank wall.

'Come.'

He led the way round one side. The house fronted a sea inlet. Boats were moored there: small rowing vessels topped by striped awnings; larger sailing ships, snugged down for the night or their stay in harbour; a bright orange rubber dinghy with an Arab asleep in it, his legs slopping in the water. Small boys were swimming in the muddy creek, splashing and laughing shrilly. A long row of narrow window-slits gashed the rough brickwork of the house under the projecting roof poles, and halfway along was an unpainted, splintery wooden door with no visible handle. Sahail Ahmed yelled and slapped the door with his open hands, and soon Parsons heard the raucous protest of the bolt on the other side.

Parsons was aware of the half-world which existed in the other part of the town. There, metalled roads carried sheikhs in Cadillacs and Jaguars between their houses and the port offices, where they emerged resplendent in Saudi head-dresses and sunglasses to conclude shady deals with Greek or Armenian factors. In that half-world the new order was being rapidly assimilated; the coast Arab had become a truck driver, and the bedu were turning from the independent life of the desert to the menial tasks on which the company found itself able to employ them. But as the door opened Parsons thought that at last he would be privileged to gain an insight into the old order of things—the way of life into which he had rashly and unpremeditatedly tried to thrust himself on his visit to the Arab café. Then, he said to

himself, he had been excluded; now he would be admitted.

Sahail Ahmed ushered Parsons through the door, which had been thrown open by a large, fat negro with nostrils but no nose.

'Is this the Nazarene?' he inquired amiably of Sahail Ahmed.

Without waiting for an answer he led the way across a large courtyard, his long white robe swishing and giving Parsons an occasional sight of a grey, horny foot.

He halted at the bottom of an outside staircase.

'I am hot, by God,' he said conversationally to Parsons, removing his red woollen skullcap, wiping his face with it and replacing the cap on his shining shaven head.

'By God, yes, it is hot,' said Sahail Ahmed.

'It is, by God,' Parsons agreed, not to be outdone.

The negro then led the way up the staircase, Parsons following him into a long hall on the first floor. Along three sides was a continuous bench covered with rugs, and the floor was strewn with carpets, higgledy-piggledy. A last ray from the setting sun struck through the doorway behind Parsons, sending his long shadow over the floor below the mote-filled golden beam.

A handful of men were squatting on the bench in a far corner, and all rose at Parsons' entrance. He looked round for Sahail Ahmed, but the boy had vanished. The negro ushered him forward, and Sahail Ahmed's father came to meet Parsons. He shook hands with Parsons, who had been expecting some exotic greeting; but the man contented himself by saying, 'Peace be upon you,' to which Parsons was able to reply correctly, 'And upon you be the Peace.'

Parsons then shook hands with the other men: there were four apart from his host. Two were small and lean, wearing white robes, headcloths and single black headropes, cartridge belts, and rough hide sandals; their rifles

lay near at hand. The third guest was sleek and fat, the skin of his face above his beard like russet-coloured crêpe de chine. He wore a white robe and a large turban, also white; over the robe he had on an overtunic of pale green silk. He was the only guest not carrying the ubiquitous Omani dagger.

The fourth man impressed Parsons at once. Sahail Ahmed's father made no introductions, and none of the men made more than the obligatory formal greeting, but Parsons knew at once that this was Khalid bin Zaglul. His robe was flowing and snowy, the overtunic striped in gold and red, and he wore a Saudi head-dress of white silk edged with gold, falling from above his ears round his shoulders; the head-dress was secured by a three-tiered gold headrope.

The guests seated themselves, Parsons on a straight-backed cane chair, and Sahail Ahmed's father shouted something over his shoulder. Two slaves came in, offering tea and coffee; only Khalid took tea.

They sipped silently. Not a word was spoken, and Parsons, with his lingering dislike of social meals, felt that his ears were becoming red, that he wanted to blow his nose. Another slave handed round sticky cloying sweets. Parsons reached out with his left hand, at the last moment remembering Sahail Ahmed's injunctions and withdrawing it, transferring his small coffee-cup from his right hand and taking the glutinous cube safely with it. He ate the stuff, which tasted like Turkish delight only more so, he thought, and then wondered how to rid his fingers of the mess which still adhered to them. He glanced guardedly round for a hint. Khalid was licking his fingers with every evidence of enjoyment, so Parsons followed suit, relieved.

His stomach rumbled fruitily, then gave a dying groan. Agonized, his eyes flickered over the other guests; no one took any notice. The fat man squatted in a heap,

his mouth full of sweetmeats, incapable of talk even if he had felt like it. The desert men sat erect but relaxed, as still as lizards on a wall. Khalid's blue-black beard moved as he swallowed his second cup of tea. That was all. Flies were buzzing somewhere; the golden shadow was fading into deep bronze. Far away a muezzin wailed from a minaret, a sea-bird's cry fading like the light. Sahail Ahmed's father rose, followed by the fat man and Khalid. The slaves brought water, and after the ritual ablutions the three men faced Mecca and made their obeisances. The desert men sat impassive, unregarding; Parsons, uncommitted but self-conscious, writhed in his chair.

This, then, was a piece of Islam. He wondered whether he was doomed to disappointment. This rigid and silent formality, this sudden display of what seemed to him unnecessarily overt religiosity: were these what he had come to find? Surely not. He told himself that he must be as it were on approval. Soon the formality would relax, somebody would start talking, crack a joke. Someone, surely, was going to say something? The fat man's jaws were working, and he had finished his sweets.

It seemed that the fat man was working up to a conversational gambit. Parsons wondered how he would begin. Did Arabs talk about the weather? He waited expectantly.

The fat man opened his mouth like a carp, and then emitted a resonant belch.

The silence shut down again, and the slave brought Parsons his third cup of coffee. Frenzied, he took out an unopened carton of cigarettes and opened it. Then he passed it round. Everybody took a cigarette, and Parsons stood up with immeasurable relief, snapping his lighter and moving from his host to Khalid, from Khalid to the fat man, from the fat man to the bedu sheikhs, and finally back to his chair. He felt like a prisoner, condemned to

ten years' solitary confinement in a telephone booth, who is given parole after five years for a week-end on the town. He lighted his own cigarette and sat down again, inhaling deeply. The last of the desert men still clutched Parsons' cigarette carton, but Parsons did not dare to ask for it, nor did he greatly care. He relaxed.

When the cigarettes were finished Sahail Ahmed's father and Khalid rose almost simultaneously; the others followed suit; farewells were made swiftly in the gloom; and almost before he had realized what was happening Parsons found himself descending the outside staircase with Sahail Ahmed and the Negro, who let Parsons and the boy out into the dark street fronting the creek. The small boys had gone. So had the Arab and his rubber dinghy. The water gleamed and shivered under an indigo sky, and the small boats near the edge bobbed lazily, an occasional wavelet slapping their bows and counters.

Parsons sighed.

'Come,' said Sahail Ahmed.

As they walked through the streets Parsons felt the need to talk.

He said, 'That was very kind of your father, Sahail Ahmed—to invite me to take coffee, I mean.'

'It is nothing.'

Parsons was tempted to agree, but refrained from saying so. He said, 'Let me see, you have another two years in school, haven't you?'

'No,' said Sahail Ahmed. 'I have not. I am leaving after Ramadan.'

Parsons was aghast.

'But why? The last year is the most important of all, and you'll miss it!'

'Yes, praise God.'

'But, Sahail Ahmed! You sound as though you will be glad to leave the school.'

'Glad? By God, I shall be glad indeed. I hate the school, Muktibbun. I spit on the school!'

Sahail Ahmed spat.

'But why? Why? I thought you were happy.'

Sahail Ahmed gripped Parsons' arm with surprising strength.

He said, 'Muktibbun, I like your lessons, for it is good that a man should learn the speech and writing of others, even of unbelievers, for he can learn from them. And I do not mind the lessons of the sitti Marietta—at least, I did not. Now I am not so sure, because now I am a man, and she is only a woman! But she teaches us about things like chemistry, and she tells us that it was the Arabs who first found these things. But the others! The apes of engineering, machine-shop practice, workshop maintenance'—he hissed the hated words in English—'these are dogs and sons of festering bitches, may they roast screaming to eternity in Iblis!'

Parsons stopped, astounded, and faced the boy.

'Sahail Ahmed!' he exclaimed. 'What has come over you? What's the matter?'

Sahail Ahmed said, "These pig-eating infidels try to debase us. With many they succeed. But I, I am a true Arab, and my blood is noble. My father said to me, "Go, my son, learn from them, suck their brains. The world is changing, and I am too old to change, but you must." And so he sent me to your school. But he thinks I learn only things like the speech and writing of the Nazarenes. The other things... I dare not tell him of the corruption. I dare not!'

Parsons thought the boy was raving.

'I do not understand,' he said. 'Corruption? What corruption?'

'Muktibbun, Muktibbun.' Tears were running down Sahail Ahmed's cheeks, while Parsons thought wildly of possible indignities to which the boy might have been subjected by the technical instructors: mass ravishment? pork chops?

He led the boy along, waiting till Sahail Ahmed's sobs had diminished and he was merely sniffing, then he said, 'Tell me.'

Sahail Ahmed seemed for a moment ready to break out into a fresh storm of weeping, but he gained a grip on his emotions.

'Pigs,' he said. 'They think to make me a pig, too, grovelling and rooting in the ground. I say to you now, Muktibbun, that my father would kill me if he knew that I, Sahail Ahmed bin Rashid bin Mutlauk, have been forced to—to work with my hands!'

They were walking up the road to the settlement gate. Parsons felt drained of all emotion. The evening, he thought, had been just that little bit too much. He hoped that the bar at the club would still be open; then, looking at his watch, saw that it was not quite nine-fifteen. It felt like two in the morning.

He wondered whether he ought to tell the principal what Sahail Ahmed had said. If the boy's feeling was general it would account for much that puzzled the principal. Parsons decided he ought to report the facts, but that he certainly wasn't going to. He warmed to the boy.

'Never mind,' he said, clapping Sahail Ahmed on the shoulder.

Sahail Ahmed flinched as though he had been struck. 'Who do you think I am?' he raged. 'Do you think I am a slave, touching me like that?'

Oh God, thought Parsons, what now?

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Believe me, I sympathize with you. So you are leaving because of this manual work?'

They faced each other under the light by the gate. Sahail Ahmed's lip curled.

'No, Muktibbun,' he said, and into his voice there crept a note of contempt. 'After Ramadan I am getting married. I am a man now, and a man should be married, do you not agree, Muktibbun?'

He looked sideways salaciously at Parsons and went on, 'Soon I shall have sons, Muktibbun. Tell me, how many sons have you?'

Parsons stepped closer, enraged, but Sahail Ahmed merely smiled angelically, his eyes glistening in the lamplight; then he turned and walked away from Parsons down the road.

2

Darling Mum,

Well, here I am again, nose back to the grindstone. It was a marvellous leave. Back here, in this sticky heat, it all seems like a dream. To have seen you again, and looking so fit, was marvellous. And green English grass, and English beer! Mum, I am so sorry about that last night. You see, as I explained, we have to drink a lot out here, and I suppose you might say I was getting back into practice. It honestly doesn't do any harm—here I mean. I do hope the carpet will clean up.

I suppose those swine will be starting cubbing any time soon. You pitch it to them hot and strong. I'm only sorry I can't be with you. Do you remember last year at the Boxing Day meet? No, it was the year before—time goes so fast. You remember, when we all went down and blew those trumpets? We messed up their dirty old hunt for them, didn't we? Tell Robert and Sim and all the rest to keep up the good work. But don't stay out yourself all day when the weather gets colder. I forbid it.

Wasn't all that publicity queer? You wouldn't think a letter to the papers would cause all that rumpus, would you? I wish I could have seen myself on the telly—I felt a complete clot, and it's no use telling me I was very good, because I know I wasn't. I only did it because I felt that people at home ought to know about the oryx, and what is happening out here. Since I got back I have found out that some of the sheikhs hunt from cars with machine-guns. That sort of filth is what we're up against. It almost makes me feel that the movement ought to leave

fox-hunters and so on alone and concentrate on nearextinct species like the oryx. I mean, fox-hunters don't kill many foxes after all, do they? They try to preserve them so that they can keep on killing them. That sounds queer, but I have a feeling there'll always be foxes and deer-I know this sounds blasphemous to you, so I'll change the subject. Only what I feel is, there won't always be orvx, unless we do something about it. Unless I do, I mean.

Now, about Marietta. I don't think I should have said anything at all about her if I'd known you would take it like that. I know it's an odd sort of name, but, really, her people are tremendously respectable—Haywards Heath, after all, I ask you!-and I do swear, Mum, that there is nothing at all of what you hinted between me and Marietta. I promised Dad I would look after you, and I will. I'll try to send a bit more money home each month. But it's difficult. Money just seems to melt away. The cost of living is fantastic!!

I must go now, Mum. Now do look after yourself. Do by all means go hunt-spoiling when the cubbing is on, but wrap up well, and do not stay out all day when the fox-hunting starts. Mum, I don't think I'll stay out here when my contract expires at the end of next year. I could renew it, but I think I'll come home. There! I know that little bit of news will cheer you up.

. Your ever-loving son,

John.

P.S. I really haven't made up my mind about Marietta.

Parsons blew heavily, sealed the letter, addressed it, and walked out of his bungalow to the mail-box by the club entrance. Then he went into the club. Danvers was sitting at a table with two or three other men, and Parsons, having ordered beer, went over and joined them.

Danvers said, 'Well, look what just blew in! Hi, Teacher, when did you hit the camp?'

'About two hours ago,' said Parsons. 'God, it's good to

be back.'

Danvers said, 'You guys don't know each other, do you? This is John Parsons. Teacher, meet some real desert rats from Ratland, in from Oil Rig Number 3.'

'How do you do?' said Parsons generally.

'This one is Rafferty.'

'Hello,' said Rafferty, a small, wizened, young-old man.

'And this is Pete Heinecke.'

Heinecke, a huge swarthy man with blond hair, nodded coldly.

'And last, but not least, meet the boss of the rig. This is Joe Jones, an unusual man with an unusual name.'

Danvers was grinning urbanely.

'Ah, can it,' Jones said to Danvers. 'Hi,' he greeted Parsons. 'You been on leave? Christ, that's what I could use, some leave.'

'You get nothing but leave all the time,' said Danvers. 'Sitting out there in the garden suburbs making like you're drilling for oil.'

Rafferty said, 'We're drilling for oil, boy, and we'll find it. Couple of months, you'll see. These bloody creeping

Jesuses down here better get ready for a hook-up.'

Heinecke sat stolidly staring in front of him in a vacant way which embarrassed Parsons. He said to Rafferty, 'Then—when you strike oil, I mean—that's when you get a gusher, I suppose?'

'I hope it bloody well is not.'

Rafferty stared at Parsons in amazement.

Jones said, 'You get a gusher once in a thousand times these days. When we hit that oil, boy, we just slap the old Christmas tree on top and that's it.'

'Christmas tree?'

'Sure. It's kind of an arrangement of pipes that feed

the oil straight into the pipeline. No, sir, we don't want any gushers. They can be real bad. The oil's under a hell of a pressure, see?'

'I see.'

Rafferty put in, 'We don't want no bloody gushers,' echoing Jones.

Jones said, 'Christ, no. You get a gusher, it's liable to go on fire. Then you got a load of trouble—derrick's ruined, oil's burning. All you got is a goddam great flame in the sky.'

'What do you do then?'

'Pay a guy to blow it out. Like a candle, only using high explosives. A hell of a skilled job, that is.'

'How far down are you?'

'Twenty-two hundred metres,' said Jones. 'Hell, that ain't deep. We ain't scratched the surface.'

For a moment Jones talked technological mysteries, which meant nothing to Parsons.

Rafferty said, 'You been on leave, hey? London?'

'I passed through.'

'Haw,' said Rafferty. 'You passed through? What I'd give to pass through London. I'd pass London through me, time I'd finished.'

He groaned, his lips tubular, eyes half-closed, and then said, 'Laddie, I'd be floating round Piccadilly Circus on a sea of booze, paddling me own canoe, with all the ladies of the town for me fleet of boats. Lovely, lovely London.'

Heinecke said, 'Oh, fart off,' and got up. It was only then, as Heinecke staggered to the bar, that Parsons realized the man was drunk. He came back with another bottle of whisky and set it on the table.

'Drink,' he said to Parsons.

He picked up the bottle again, and poured whisky into Parsons' beer glass.

'Drink,' he said again, more loudly.

Danvers said, 'Leave him be, Heinie. Let Teacher alone now.'

Heinecke swayed, saved himself with a frantic grip on the edge of the table, and said, 'Goddam Teach. Drink.'

'Oh well,' said Parsons. 'If you insist.'

He drank the mixture of whisky and beer.

'There,' he said.

'That's the boy,' said Jones. 'Now will you siddown, Heinie?' To Parsons he said, 'Danny wants to come up and see the rig. How about you? You want to come along?'

Parsons had no time for a rejoinder. Heinecke moved round the table, gripped him by the shirt-front, and raised him from his seat.

'Drink!' he roared.

Jones rose, slowly and deliberately, picked up the whisky bottle by the neck, and struck Heinecke over the head with it. There was a crunching sound; the bottle shattered; whisky splashed over Parsons, and Heinecke was lying on the floor unconscious, blood and whisky streaming over his face and chest.

'God, you've killed him!' Parsons said aghast.

'I kill him all the time,' Jones said.

Danvers said, 'Now you can see why he's the boss.'

'Sit down,' Jones commanded. 'Now what was I saying? Oh yeh. The rig. Danny, your friend here wants to come along, don't you, Parsons?'

'I wouldn't mind,' said Parsons.

Heinecke sat up and felt his head, staring owlishly at the others. He raised himself on to his feet, then lurched across to Parsons, leaning with his arms round Parsons' neck.

'I love you,' he said, and kissed Parsons on the ear. Parsons was so relieved he almost kissed Heinecke back. When Marietta opened the front door of her bungalow she greeted Parsons rapturously, and led him inside, made coffee, and then perched beside him on the arm of his chair, the warm curve of her thigh touching his elbow.

'John, John, I'm glad you're back,' she breathed.

'I'm glad too. Look, Marietta, I want to talk seriously for a moment.'

She waited expectantly, poised over him, her lips hungry.

'It's about the oryx.'

Marietta got up abruptly and Parsons sipped his coffee. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh yes, the oryx.'

'I must do something. A man in Aden said the Arabs are hunting them with machine-guns. It's barbarous. You know, while I was on leave I wrote a letter to the Press about it. It started quite a correspondence. Some of the letters were from complete fools, of course, but most of them were on my side. And then I had to go on television. I must have made a complete idiot of myself. They asked me all sorts of questions about the oryx, and I suddenly realized I knew nothing at all about them!'

'Oh,' said Marietta. 'Darling, you were on television? How marvellous! What was it like?'

'It was bloody hot,' said Parsons, 'but never mind that, it isn't to the point at all. What I've got to do now is find out things about the oryx. It's amazing how little information I could find out. There are four varieties in East Africa, but the Arabian oryx is the only one out here. They eat herbage, and they get quite a lot of moisture from it, so they can go without water for quite a while. There used to be herds of them all over the place, but now the herds are cut down you can only find a few of them in the Empty Quarter. They're supposed not to like the sands, and they prefer to keep to the gravel desert. Only two or three Europeans have ever succeeded in shooting one, which is some comfort. You couldn't say

that for the white rhino. . . . Are you listening, Marietta?' 'What?' She turned, and said, 'Oh yes. I'm listening. More coffee?

'No. No thanks. I'm telling you about the oryx,' he said with some impatience.

Marietta sat in another chair, crossed her legs and closed her eyes, waggling her sandal at the end of her toes.

'Well,' said Parsons. 'I've only seen an oryx once, and I want to go and observe others. If I can become expert on them it may be possible to do something to have them protected. They're beautiful, beautiful!'

His eyes had lighted up and he leaned forward.

'Beautiful,' he repeated. 'Do you know, I often wish I were someone else, someone who knew all about the desert and so on. This is a big thing, but I'll do it, I know I will!'

He paused for a moment, staring before him, no longer seeing the girl. Marietta stood up and began to undress.

'I'll use the Christmas leave,' Parsons started to say, when Marietta's movements caught his eye. 'Good heavens,' he said, 'what are you doing?'

'Taking these things off.'

She stood and faced him.

'Am I beautiful?' she asked, and then rushed into his arms. He held her, and she said, 'Oh, darling, it's been so long. Ages.'

* * *

Near the oil-rig the gravel desert was broken by outcrops of tawny yellow rock, scattered over the plain and looking like heaps of quarry refuse under the pitiless sun. The towering steel tracery of the derrick interrupted the flowing lines of the high dunes far away behind it. Parsons sat exhausted with Jones and Danvers in the little office. The heat was incredible, Parsons thought, and felt that if he did not drink something soon he would

scream or go mad. He pitied Rafferty and Heinecke working on the derrick; he himself had felt too hot to climb up and greet them during the tour of inspection, and had contented himself with waving. Now his head throbbed and his mouth was parched. If only Jones would stop talking his damnable technicalities: barrelage, shales, pressures, and God knew what. The whole trip had been a flop. What Parsons wanted to see was something really spectacular—the black spouting geyser of a gusher, or, better still, a huge roaring flame in the sky,

A sense of utter futility overcame Parsons. He had learned, watching the sweating, agonized men, that each time a new head had to be fitted to the drill the whole thing had to be brought up, dismantled section by section, and then reinserted into the earth. They were doing this every three hours. To his untechnical mind the entire process seemed a criminal waste of time. He looked at the derrick, past the drums and crates and items of incomprehensible machinery, and saw that the men were still reassembling the drill.

Suddenly, risking rudeness, he said to Jones, 'Please, may I have a drink?'

Jones stopped talking and turned to Parsons. 'Drink?' he said. 'You thirsty or something?'

'My God, yes. I've never been as thirsty in my life. How people can work in this heat I can't imagine. Aren't you thirsty, Danvers?'

'A mite,' said Danvers.

Jones said, 'Fellers working get thirsty, but we ain't done any work. Still and all, I can always use a drink.'

He went over to the paraffin refrigerator and took out three cans of beer.

'Wonderful!' said Parsons a moment later. 'Sorry I interrupted you just then. Please carry on. What you were saying is most interesting.'

'Yeah?' said Jones, and continued.

Parsons thought of Marietta. She had taken it for

granted they had resumed at the point where they were before the episode with Danvers-like Jones and his conversation, he thought, with a drink of beer in between. And yet Marietta could not understand why Parsons showed no hostility to Danvers; apparently she was convinced that it was now necessary to hate the man. Parsons, for his part, felt no hatred at all. He rather liked Danvers: the casual ease in personal relationships, the unruffled calm and expertise he showed in matters of which Parsons was ignorant: oil, personnel management, the mechanism of motor-cars. Women too, Parsons thought. But why harbour resentment? People transposed to Arabia from their various home backgrounds behaved in the oddest ways: he himself for instance. And Parsons was certain that if Marietta had remained in Haywards Heath she would have behaved a good deal differently. On the other hand Danvers was all of a piece; Parsons felt that the man would behave as he did wherever he was. He had never tried to deceive Parsons, and this was the most important point in Parsons' view. One thing he could not stand, he told himself, was deceit.

Jones and Danvers stood up, so Parsons broke off his reverie and got up also.

'Well,' said Jones, 'I guess that's all. You're sure you won't stay the night in the garden suburb?'

'You can keep it,' Danvers said. 'And you know what you can do with your derrick and your drill.'

'But for that you'd be out of a job, both of you,' Jones said, and just for an instant Parsons was afforded a glimpse of the man's dedication.

Jones led the way out of the office hut, from the stifling shade to the burning sunlight.

'I guess you've seen everything,' he said.

Danvers said, 'It's sixty miles back. We'd best be rolling.'

They passed a large shed.

'What's in there?' Parsons asked, feeling that per-

haps he could leave behind him an impression that he had been more interested than he had appeared at first.

'That? Just a storage shed. Nothing much. Want to see it?'

Parsons said eagerly, 'Yes, please. It's about the only thing we haven't seen,' hoping that he did not sound too fatuous, but anxious to conciliate Jones, something in him answering to that tiny gleam of the dedicated spirit.

Jones threw open the door.

'There. Nothing much, like I said.'

It was dim inside the store. Parsons saw sacks, bales, drums, lengths of girder stacked against the walls and rising to meet the crossbeams of the hut itself. He looked along and upwards, and then gave a cry, staggering backwards. Something hung from one of the crossbeams, tied by its legs. From Parsons' viewpoint the thing was backed by a girder and a beam in some fantastic parody of crucifixion.

'What in hell's the matter?' Danvers said, peering over Parsons' shoulder.

Jones looked into the shed, and laughed.

'So that's what had you scared. C'mon in, have a look.' He tugged Parsons forward, and said, 'Some antelope the boys shot early this morning. We got him for meat, but the native hands won't touch it because it didn't have its throat cut Muslim fashion. Can you beat that?'

They approached, Parsons hanging back but propelled by a curiosity stronger than himself. The dead thing was hanging by the hind legs, he now saw, the belly a vast red slit from which blood dripped downwards over the lesser bleeding wound in the throat. Flies buzzed round the wounds, and round the pool of blood on the ground. Long ropes of red mucus hung from the mouth and nostrils; the white hide with its darker markings on the head and legs was spattered with blood from the small hole in the shoulder where the

bullet had entered, and the great hole under the spine on the opposite side where it had emerged. Only the horns, slim, sharp, over two feet in length, seemed untouched and aloof from the violation of death.

'Oh God, no,' he said. 'An oryx. It's an oryx. I thought----

'You thought what?' Jones asked. 'I don't get it.'

'You murdering bastards,' Parsons said softly. 'You filthy murdering bastards.'

His father had been a shooting man, and Parsons had been brought up on the fringes of that sporting world. One of his clearest childhood memories was the unutterable boredom of standing behind his father in an autumn spinney in the cold dusk, waiting for pigeons to fly in; he was afraid to fidget because of his father's wrath. The outrider pigeon had flown over; Parsons and his father had frozen into complete immobility under the red and yellow foliage of their cover, from which leaves were detaching themselves and falling to ground with dry, rustling noises. The first birds of the flock wheeled over, then swooped into the trees.

Parsons stared over his father's shoulder, listening as the birds clapped their wings before settling. More and more birds flew in, all round and above, and the clapping of wings was like unearthly applause in a world of leaves and grey shuttling ghosts, seeming to have nothing to do with the pigeons at all. The main flock had settled; Parsons' father clapped his hands twice, and all the birds rose again into the air, wheeling in sudden panic; then the shots; Pip, their springer spaniel, who had been crouching at the man's feet, retrieving; then the homeward trudge with Parsons humping the game bag with its burden of warm, feathery corpses.

An autumn shoot had killed Parsons' father. One day he had gone walking up partridges in the stubble fields of a nearby farm, in company with the farmer.

Parsons was still an undergraduate. The men had

put up a covey: each man shot a bird, while the rest whirred down the gentle slope of the field into the next one. When Parsons' father climbed the fence dividing the fields, whether through excitement or sheer carelessness, he omitted to break his gun or remove the shells. He slipped, fell, and received the double discharge in his stomach. It was towards the end of the Long Vacation; Parsons was reading Gibbon in the dying light when the telephone rang. He and his mother were driven by the farmer's daughter to the cottage hospital, and were shown into the tiny ward where his father lay in a bed with screens round it.

The doctor on duty explained briefly that it was impossible to operate. The spine had remained undamaged, but the wounds were too severe to hold out any hope of recovery. Two twelve-bore cartridges at point-blank range had torn into the man's stomach. (Two or three years later, talking in a country inn, Parsons had learned what that meant: the cavernous wound, the mess of ruptured and shattered organs impacted with bone splinters and cloth and buttons.) His father's face was lemon-yellow, sunken. His mother ran forward with a cry, then suddenly collapsed in a faint. Parsons' father opened his eyes, and looked expressionlessly at his son. Then, after a moment, he said in a low but clear voice, 'Look after your mother, John'; then his breath caught in a rattle, and he died.

So Parsons looked at the butchered oryx and said, 'You filthy murdering bastards.'

He turned, blundering out of the shed and running to the car. He was on the verge of tears, and felt the beginning of an emotion wholly strange to him since childhood, an over-mastering, sobbing rage. He clenched his hands, his eyes filled with tears and his lips trembling.

Danvers got into the car and they drove away, Jones standing by the shed with one hand lifted in a puzzled

farewell. Parsons scarcely listened to Danvers' expostulations about his behaviour; he sat hunched round in his seat staring at the desert until he had regained full control of himself. Only then did he turn.

'I'm sorry, Danny,' he said. 'It was too much for me. I made a fool of myself.'

'You can say that again,' Danvers said grimly. 'You can't blame Joe: he didn't even shoot the goddam thing. Somebody else did. And, anyway, it was shot for meat. To those guys meat is just meat. Jesus, I wish I'd never shown you that oryx that other time; maybe you'd be a little more balanced about the whole thing.'

Parsons said, 'There's something I'd like to tell you,' and explained about his father.

'Gee, I'm sorry.'

Danvers was apologetic.

'I thought you'd just got all steamed up about the oryx,' he said in extenuation. 'If I'd realized I could have told Joe what was eating you. He'd have understood. I'll tell him next time I see him. That sure was rough about your father.'

Parsons said:

'No, I was steamed up about the oryx. I still think it's inexcusable to shoot them. I don't regret that I blew my top, not at all. But I should have kept my head afterwards and told Jones why they mustn't shoot oryx. The way I left him, why, he may have everybody shooting the animals just out of spite.'

'No. Not Joe. He's not built like that. You heard him say they shot that one for meat. But it wasn't halal so the hands wouldn't eat it. I bet they don't shoot any more: Joe won't waste his time having game shot if nobody's going to eat it.'

'You really think that?'

'Sure. Now relax, boy.'

Parsons leaned back on the seat and closed his eyes.

He shaded his brow with his forearm, feeling the sun hot on the sensitive skin even as they drove.

'It's funny,' he said, 'but I never worried much about my father's shooting. I was simply bored by it all. But at one time my mother seemed actually to enjoy it, or at least she enjoyed some sort of status associated with it. When Dad was alive she would boast at coffee parties—you know, she'd tell all the other women about "our shoot," and so on. It made me squirm. We weren't well off, really, and Dad got his shooting through the courtesy of local farmers. Some old hag would go on about how her husband had been up to Scotland for the salmon fishing, and then Mum would say, "Of course, Harold is a shooting man. He brought home a beautiful brace of partridges the other day. . . ." And then, when Dad died, she changed. In a way I think she's happier now.'

'You think so?' Danvers said. 'Say, give me a smoke.'

3

THERE was no regular cycle of seasons. Spring followed rain, and if there was no rain for three years, for six years, then spring came one year in three or in six. But the weather in what Parsons had to call late autumn, simply to establish the illusion of seasonal progression, became a little cooler, with occasional north-easterly winds.

The routine work of teaching was beginning to irk Parsons. His class gave him no trouble, but equally they never gave him that spark-back of sudden understanding on their part which is the teacher's greatest reward. Sahail Ahmed was polite but withdrawn, living for the day when he should leave. Marietta told Parsons that Sahail Ahmed had become openly contemptuous of her lessons, but never gave her the opportunity to take action: his contempt showed itself in small ways as he hurried as though by accident in front of her, ignored a pencil which she had dropped, talked loudly and disparagingly to his classmates about women, and related sexual adventures to them in her hearing. She confided to Parsons that it was only because of him that she remained in the job; and when he told her that he, too, intended to resign at the end of the school year she went about for days wrapped up in a secret joy. Plainly, she had convinced herself that as soon as they were both back in England Parsons wuld marry her. Parsons kept his reservations. He could not see himself pushing a lawnmower round a subtopian garden and spending Sunday morning in the English religious observance of washing a little motor-car. His search for the true Arabia had been overlaid by his preoccupation with the oryx; but once he was in the desert, he felt, they would come together. He would locate oryx, study them, and then go home armed with facts and work for the World Wildlife Fund, to which he had already sent a small subscription—small because he could not afford to give much, and also because he knew that he would do work for the oryx which could not be assessed in terms of money. All in all, apart from his dissatisfaction with teaching, he was happy, and so was Marietta.

* * *

Khalid was really most impressive, Parsons thought, as he sat in the sheikh's palatial lounge. One end of the room was open and fronted a courtyard in which a fountain played into a large marble basin; the courtyard was floored with mosaic gleaming with gold. He leaned back in his chair and sipped grenadine, feeling comfortable and expansive.

Yes, he thought, it had been a very good idea to seek out Khalid: that at least he owed to Sahail Ahmed and his father, Bin Mutlauk. It had been Sahail Ahmed's suggestion in the first place that Parsons should meet Khalid if he wanted to find out more about the oryx, and Sahail Ahmed's father had made the introduction which rendered their present meeting possible. Parsons mused for a moment over the knowledge which Sahail Ahmed seemed to have not only of what Parsons was doing but of what he intended to do, and then dismissed it. He put down his grenadine and offered Khalid a cigarette.

'May it please you,' he said formally, congratulating himself on his knowledge of the courtesies.

They had been talking for perhaps half an hour. There were no other guests present, and there had been none of the strict silence of the meeting at Bin Mutlauk's.

Khalid had asked questions about London. Parsons had expected the sheikh to be well informed, but it was not so: he showed a surprising ignorance of the outside world which belied his urbane manner. London itself, the traffic, the buildings, he took for granted. It was in other ways that he showed his limited knowledge of the world.

'Yourself, Mr Parsons,' he had asked, 'you possess many camels, no doubt? Is the pasturage good?'

Parsons found himself in a quandary until he had a happy inspiration. He drew a photograph from his wallet and passed it over to Khalid. The photograph was of his father leaning against a fence, his shotgun under his arm, and the background was of rolling grassland dotted with sheep.

'We have no camels,' Parsons said. 'The climate is not good for them, and they would die. But we have sheep, as you see.'

Khalid nodded gravely.

He said, 'And who is this man?'

'My father.'

'He still lives?'

'No, he is dead. He—he was shot, and died of his wounds.'

Khalid nodded again, his eyes unfathomable, and handed back the photograph.

'It is a sin to make an image or a likeness,' he said. 'But some hold that a photograph is permissible. Myself, I could wish that I had such a photograph of my father, God prosper him in Paradise. That must be a great blessing to you. I can see that your father was a man.'

The talk drifted on to other subjects, while Parsons felt that he had established a link of sympathy with Khalid. So now, as he lighted Khalid's cigarette, he felt that the time had come to broach the question of the oryx.

'Mr Parsons,' said Khalid, exhaling smoke and draw-

ing his robe about him. 'I am told that you have some interest in the oryx.'

Parsons experienced an uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach. But, of course, Khalid's mention of the oryx was mere coincidence. He calmed himself.

'Yes,' he said eagerly. 'Yes, I have.'

'Then you must come with me when I go to stay with my people. You will be welcome, Mr Parsons. I have decided. I will take you myself when it is convenient.'

Parsons stammered his expressions of gratitude, to which Khalid made a slight disclaiming gesture. It was agreed that Khalid would take Parsons into the desert during Parsons' Christmas vacation. He left eventually, telling himself that Khalid was a really splendid man when you got to know him.

* * *

Khalid sat in a café with Bin Mutlauk, talking through the cacophony of the radio.

'Truly,' he said, 'the heathen are full of surprises. I have met this Nazarene, Parsons. When we visited your house, my cousin, I was undecided about him. It is true that he observed the courtesies well enough—do you think he knew that we would have killed him had he not done so?—but he seemed a child and a fool. Now I think otherwise. He behaved well with me. His father was a man. I saw a picture of his father, and the man was carrying a gun. He had many sheep, and seemed a man of wealth. Why this Parsons is a Muktibbun in the school I do not know. These infidels are cunning and devious; perhaps Parsons is more than he seems. I do not know, and it is of no great consequence. But I have invited him to go with me to my people, and if God wills it he will find his oryx. Do you know, Parsons' father was killed by shooting? No doubt it happened in a raid. By God! I did not know these infidels went raiding.'

* * *

Parsons discussed with Danvers his visit to Khalid, and mentioned in particular Khalid's apparent ignorance of the outside world. Danvers was not at all surprised.

'What the hell,' he said. 'Some of these sheikhs, they've been all over, seen everything. Some of them are just hicks. I'd say Khalid is somewhere in between but that doesn't mean you should under-estimate him. Don't you ever do that. He can swing a whole lot of weight in his own backyard, boy.'

Parsons said, 'Yes, that's what makes me feel uneasy. Sahail Ahmed said that Khalid and the desert sheikhs could have a man killed, and no one would trouble about it—not even the Sultan. But what would happen if they killed an oil-company employee?'

'Don't kid yourself,' Danvers said. 'Here, you're back in feudal times. These sheikhs have absolute power in their own territories, just so long as they play along with the Sultan and don't get to playing footies with the Saudis. In the interior I saw a kid of eight or nine with both his hands chopped off and hung around his neck by order of one of the local *imams*. The kid had stolen a pair of sandals.'

'But what did you do?'

'Do? I smiled and walked past like the big brave guy I am. What could I do? Tell them that this sort of thing wasn't allowed in a parliamentary democracy? Democracy is a dirty word over there; and here too. You got to adjust your thinking, Johnnie boy. The benefits of civilization we bring to the Arab are motor-vehicles, booze, and accurate rifles. They love it. If they killed an oil-company employee where would we get evidence to prove it? The guy would just disappear, that's all. We could protest to the Sultan, and he would promise to look into things, but nobody would get anywhere. Now look. I don't know how things are in Kuwait and Bahrain and

the Trucial Sheikhdoms, but here what we're after is oil. Oil greases the moral sensibilities so you wouldn't know they're there.'

'It's terrible,' said Parsons. 'What chance has the oryx of surviving? The Arabs don't care. You oil people don't care. It's a disgraceful state of affairs.'

He was exasperated by what seemed to him an attitude of heartless cynicism on Danvers' part.

Danvers said, 'You ought to leave those oryx alone. Some of the guys on the camp are saying you're crazy. We're not real frantic conformists, but a man can step just that little bit too far out of line. You want to stick your neck out, why not do it in a socially approved fashion? Plenty of guys get hot under the collar over slavery. That doesn't bother you?'

'Well,' said Parsons. 'Well, yes it does.'

'So why don't you try and do something about it?'
Parsons made a vague gesture.

Danvers said, 'Or why don't you look around at these happy Arabs? They got hookworm, trachoma, syphilis, hernias, anything you want. Go train as a doctor if you want to do something useful.'

Parsons said, 'You don't understand. The oryx, it's ...'

He could not explain. Though his estimate of Danvers' cynicism had been tempered by the man's obvious compassion for the Arabs, he still felt that Danvers was being wilfully obtuse. Parsons had been in some manner called to dedicate himself to the oryx, he knew; and it irked him that Danvers could not see this.

Danvers said, 'You think an animal should come before human beings, is that it?'

Parsons sighed. Danvers was the sort of person who enjoyed an argument for its own sake; because of this Parsons did not know where Danvers' sympathies lay or even if he had any. Danvers was working so hard at the shape of his argument that he had lost sight of the fact that the argument was about something: something that

mattered to Parsons more than the form of the discussion.

He said, 'Don't be ridiculous. You talk as if there were two mutually exclusive alternatives: either I'm interested in animals or I'm interested in human beings. I'm interested in both. But slavery and medicine are for politicians and doctors to deal with. Experts. I can work to save the oryx without that meaning I don't care for humanity. Why, the animal life on this planet is one of the most precious of humanity's heritages.'

'So you're an expert on the oryx?' Danvers asked mocking. 'Why, you never even saw a goddam oryx before I showed you one and told you about it. I should have kept my mouth shut.'

Parsons burst out, 'No, I'm not an expert on oryx, but I will be, I will be! Then you'll see.'

4

Parsons had thought that perhaps Khalid would travel by camel caravan, but found himself sitting in a Chrysler station-wagon instead. They sat together behind Khalid's driver, who wore a navy-blue fisherman's jersey and a yachting cap. He was a large negro slave with a disconcerting habit of turning round from the wheel as he drove, and joining in the talk. Parsons now began to forget his quarrel with Marietta, becoming caught up in a mood of holiday. Neither Parsons nor his mother had been able to afford to run a car, and Parsons still took a childish pleasure in rolling along in a big shiny machine, especially one which he did not have to drive, or clean, himself. They followed the narrow metalled road by the pipeline, heading north-west on the first leg of the journey, which would take them to Oil Rig Number 1. Still in the greenery of the coastal strip, with its crowded population, they drove with a perpetual blare of the horn, miraculously avoiding donkeys, camels, carts, and people streaming endlessly by along the road under the palms.

When Marietta realized that Parsons was serious in his resolve to accompany Khalid into the interior she had been at first tearful, then enraged. She had thought they would spend the Christmas vacation together, perhaps in Tehran. He was wilfully abandoning her to go on a wild-goose chase. Tears embarrassed Parsons, so that he was gruff and offhand with Marietta. Sensing his fundamental unconcern, she became furious with him. He did not love her, did not care about her at all. Parsons protested half-heartedly, but it was no use. Their final evening together was spent in the club bar, Mari-

etta morose and silent, Parsons itching to be away. He did not go back with her to her bungalow, and now he was inclined to regret it. She was warm-hearted, generous of herself despite the inhibitions of her upbringing; and now that he was travelling away from her he felt that he had behaved badly. Still, it was too late to worry.

Khalid was polite and amiable. He had dismissed Parsons' fervent thanks with an immemorial gesture, eyes closed, hands spread out, and kept the conversation to the sort of topics hesitantly and self-consciously discussed by Englishmen who talk together in a train. At length the littoral strip was left behind, cut off as though by a knife, and they were in the gravel desert. Khalid and Parsons exhaled simultaneously. Now there was a wide, wide sky, and huge banks of grey cloud building up in the north; a cool wind through the quarter-lights as they rushed on, and soon the steel tower of the oil-rig. They did not stop, but followed the pipeline still as it turned due west towards the next rig.

They reached the second oil-rig after twenty miles. The road ceased abruptly, and the driver carried on as if it were still there.

'Have we far to go?' Parsons asked.

Khalid said, 'It is about an hour. Soon we will stop and have tea, though. Say two hours, then, if the others do not catch us up. If they do it may be a little longer.'

'The others?'

Parsons was surprised; he had not known there were to be others.

'Oh, there are no more guests.' Khalid smiled, and said, 'There are some of my people coming behind. An escort, you would say? There are two Land Rovers. We are close to the country of the Beni Gersh, and we have a blood feud with those people. I think on the whole we had better wait for my men in a little while. We do not wish to get into trouble, by God!'

Parsons swallowed.

'No,' he managed to say. 'No, I suppose not.'

They ran into trouble, however, though not from raiders. The car suddenly started to bump more than usual, while Abdullah, the driver, shouted and wrestled with the wheel as he braked. He stopped the car and got out. Khalid and Parsons followed. The offside front tyre was flat, the casing slashed and ripped by the sharp-edged stones.

Parsons looked round. To eastward the derrick of the oil-rig was still visible on the horizon.

'Do we need help?' he asked, with the ignorance born of his unfamiliarity with motor-cars.

Abdullah smiled.

'I will change the wheel while water is boiling for tea,' he said. 'It is nothing. We have three spares.'

He swaggered to the rear compartment of the station-wagon and opened the tailgate, bringing out a spirit stove and a kettle, which he filled from a jerrican of water. He pumped up the stove and lighted it, then went for a spare wheel. Parsons watched idly, offering Khalid a cigarette. They smoked in silence, the hiss of the spirit stove loud between them.

Abdullah took off the nave plate and loosened the wheel-nuts. Then he jacked up the wheel, removed the nuts, and took off the wheel, grunting. He carried the wheel away from the vehicle, placing it near Parsons, who thought that the man could surely have rolled it instead of carrying it.

Abdullah said to Khalid, 'I will look at the shockabsorbers and springs before I fit the spare. They may have been damaged.'

The two men watched as the slave wriggled face upwards under the car. His right hip touched the jack, and there was a small grinding noise as the stones shifted under it. The jack slipped sideways on the loose surface, the car lurched, then the offside front end fell down on Abdullah's body. His legs jerked with such force that a

sandal flew from one of his feet, landing perhaps twenty feet away. Abdullah was not screaming, but making strange guttural noises deep in his throat.

Parsons exclaimed, and hurried forward. Khalid got up unflustered, and joined him. They peered under the car, and saw that Abdullah was pinned under the heavy forged cross-member of the front suspension. His eyes were rolling wildly, showing the whites, and blood trick-led from the corner of his mouth.

'He will die,' Khalid commented.

Parsons said, 'My God, we must get him out of there. Poor devil!' and realized he was speaking in English. He picked up the jack handle and tried to drag the jack from under the car, but it was wedged immovably. Panting, he tried to lift the side of the car.

'Come on.' he said to Khalid. 'Help!'

Khalid said, 'Please God the wheel-hub is not damaged. The bungling fool: I told him many times to pile up stones underneath in case the jack should slip.'

Parsons turned and faced Khalid.

'Are you going to help?' he asked.

Khalid said, 'Calm yourself, Mr Parsons.'

He leaned down, and with a movement too swift for Parsons to intercept he drew the heavy Omani dagger and severed Abdullah's jugular vein; his blood gouted over the stones and then ran among them and down into the permeable ground, while the man sighed as his life ran out, and died.

Parsons felt his stomach contract and his bowels loosen, but saved himself from complete shame at the last moment. He turned away, his eyes hot with compassion for the dead man, hatred for Khalid, and shame at his own incompetence. Surely Abdullah could have been saved?

Khalid said, 'Do not disturb yourself, Mr Parsons. The man was a slave,' and began to make tea.

Parsons sat in a nightmare, and sipped bitter tea from a tiny cup, waving away the flies and noticing with

particular clarity how the small things of life continue after a death: the astringent tea quenching his thirst, the need for a cigarette, the irksome flies. And yet the whole framework of things had shifted for him like the car from the jack, and he was pinned inextricably now, suddenly dependent on beings who lived easily in this alien world. Beside him Khalid smoked, content and at ease; the weather was no warmer than a spring day in England.

Parsons considered whether he should call off the whole thing. In one sense it would have been possible: had this been a mere jaunt, a desert holiday, he could have abandoned it, walked back to Oil Rig 2, waited for a lift on the next truck to the coast. But the oryx prevented him, so that there was really no choice; he told himself that he must be prepared to suffer in order to fulfil his destiny. Then he looked across furtively at the legs protruding from beneath the station-wagon, and his self-preoccupation suddenly seemed a vile indulgence. A slave. A dead slave, but something more than that confronted him. He saw the poor broken body as the last, or present, link in a chain of maimed and tortured bodies -mere things, chattels, to those who owned them-dying under a car in Arabia, dying in Siberian saltmines, dying in the plantations of America and the British West Indies, dying in the galleys of the Moors, dying in the longships of the Vikings, dying on Roman holidays and in Greek leadmines, dying beside the Pyramids of Egypt, the ziggurats of Babylonia, the ramparts of the Great Wall of China.

And somewhere in the desert the oryx roamed free.

* * *

After an hour they saw a dust-cloud, heard engines, and soon the Land Rovers drew up, loaded with armed tribesmen and each driven by a negro slave like Abdullah. Khalid and Parsons got up to greet the new arrivals.

Men jacked up the Chrysler and dragged out Abdullah's corpse, taking it off the track and burying it in a shallow grave, while others swiftly fitted the spare wheel. All the men shouted all the time, even if their hearer was only a few inches away, and soon Parsons' head was throbbing. Tea was brewed and drunk, and then the party left in line abreast, a Land Rover on each side of the stationwagon, which was driven by an Arab called Salim. This man had a squint so pronounced that Parsons wondered how the car could possibly be kept on a straight course. He closed his eyes and estimated distances to keep his mind from Abdullah and from the throbbing headache.

Oil Rig 2 was about forty-five miles from the Coast. To the north-west of Oil Rig 2 was the third rig, which Parsons had visited with Danvers; it would be about fifteen or twenty miles from their present position, though they were moving at fifty miles an hour over the gravel, still heading due west. Parsons wondered whether Jones had shot any more oryx, and hoped he had not.

Khalid said, 'We will eat when we get to Ain al Mabsout.

'Ain al Mabsout?'

'That is where my people are. It is pleasant there.'

Happy Springs, Parsons thought, translating. He wondered bitterly whether Abdullah had any family waiting for him.

'Soon we shall be there,' Khalid said. 'It is perhaps forty miles. Then we will eat. By God! I am hungry.'

PARSONS first saw Ain al Mabsout as a cluster of palms lifted on a shimmering silver lake of mirage in which the palms were reflected upside down. As they approached, the gravel gave way to sand; the speed of the Chrysler slowed, and they stopped. One of the Land Rovers went on, while the other halted, and the men attached a towing chain to the station-wagon. It was towed over the soft sand by the Land Rover, in four-wheel drive with the booster engaged, for two or three hundred yards until the soft patch of sand was past and they were on hard ground. But to their left and in front, beyond Ain al Mabsout, the dunes rose like mountain ranges, their foothills dotted with patches of green tribulus among which bloomed vivid yellow flowers; to their right stretched the gravel in an unbroken sweep to the northward.

To Parsons the oasis presented only a blur of confused impressions: of green tufted palms, coughing camels, bleating goats, shouting men, silent veiled women, the sudden glimpse of water in an irrigation channel, a hotchpotch of palm-frond huts, and here and there a well with a low wall and a fly cluster of children.

The Chrysler stopped outside a hut. Salim the driver

opened Parsons' door and squinted in at him.

Khalid said, 'This is where you will stay, Mr Parsons. I will send a slave to fetch you when it is time to eat. Till then, peace be with you.'

He inclined his head slightly in dismissal.

Parsons got out and said, 'Upon you be the Peace,' and stood aside while Salim shut the door of the car and then preceded him into the hut, bowing him in and then leav-

ing him alone. Parsons stood listening as Salim drove Khalid away; he felt nervous and uncertain of himself like a child on its first night away from home. A ragged Arab came in carrying Parsons' bedroll and other luggage, which Salim had evidently unloaded before moving off, for Parsons had forgotten all about it.

The hut was some twenty-five feet by twelve. Parsons thought it was like being in a carpet shop: both the floor and the walls were carpeted. Parsons stared at the complex variety of geometrical designs in the carpets while the Arab unpacked swiftly and silently, laying out the sleeping bag on the camp bed near the innermost wall and surrounding the bed with Parsons' few necessities: shaving things, spare clothing, cigarettes, fly repellent. Then he bowed himself out, leaving Parsons alone once again. Flies hummed in the hut like a dynamo. Parsons looked up at the roof of palm-fronds and saw an enormous scorpion-spider, with a body like a thrush's egg and legs five inches across. He retreated hastily and went to sit on the camp bed, feeling a sudden need to relieve himself but not knowing where to go. The hut was dim but cool, and Parsons shivered a little. After a while he lighted a cigarette and lay back on the bed, smoking and dropping the ash into a spare shoe. Then he stubbed out the cigarette in the shoe and dozed, prevented from sleeping by the noises outside and the memory of Abdullah the slave.

Parsons' first reaction had been against Khalid. Why, why, had the sheikh seen fit to kill Abdullah? He told himself that it was the merciful thing to do in the circumstances, seeking an excuse for Khalid's behaviour: Abdullah would probably have died anyway, and Khalid had refused to allow the man to endure prolonged suffering. The slave would have needed expert medical aid, and there was no hope of getting any. Parsons continued to find reasons in extenuation of Khalid's action, but

despite these there was left in his mind the knowledge that Khalid was quite merciless.

* * *

It was sunset, and the noise quieted during the prayer. Soon afterwards the slave who had unpacked returned. He was carrying a bundle of Arab clothing, and said, 'It is the sheikh's desire that you wear these clothes. It is more seemly.'

He gave the bundle to Parsons and then turned his back, respecting Parsons' modesty. The clothes consisted of a loincloth, a light tunic and belt, a long white overtunic, a headcloth, and a plain black headrope. Parsons put them on, reminded of dressing for a fancy-dress ball at his university. He kept on his own sandals, and said to the Arab, 'There. I am ready.'

They walked under the palms in the moonlight, without speaking, and at length they reached a large square fort, which had been hidden by the thick palm grove from Parsons' earlier, cursory, and confused inspection. The building was like a large blockhouse, a featureless cube with a base of perhaps eighty yards, and small windows high up in the façade. The slave hammered on the door, which opened to the accompaniment of cursings and creakings, while the slave kept up a loud bellowing, exhorting those within to hasten, to open for the nasrani prince. At last the door was open, and the two men went into the fort. In the first courtyard it was extremely dark; only a single shaft of moonlight struck on to a latticed window, under which was another door. Dark figures stood or squatted along the walls, clutching rifles.

The slave hammered on the door, yelling, 'Open, dogs and sons of dogs! Make way for the sheikh of the unbelievers, whom the lord Khalid in his wisdom has granted the favour of hospitality.'

The second door led into a second courtyard, even

smaller than the first. Here the moonlight was subdued into a faint radiance, in which Parsons walked with his guide to a passage in the opposite wall. The gloom deepened finally into complete blackness; Parsons tripped against some obstacle, and then the slave's hand under his arm was leading him upwards-up a flight of stone steps. At the top they turned abruptly left into a corridor, where there was a flicker of light from a carbide lamp hanging halfway along the wall. They turned again at the end of the corridor into darkness. Parsons was sweating and nervous, reminded of a visit to a seaside fun fair, where with the self-confidence of ten years he had paid sixpence to enter the Spooky House, and had walked down just such dark corridors, to be terrified by sudden shrieks, soft strands brushing his face, the flash of an illuminated skull.

Then a door opened before them. They were in a large hall, lit at one end by a patch of hard white light, which made an island in the general blackness. Some thirty men were seated in a rectangle. Parsons approached, blinking, dazzled, then saw that the light came from a pressure lamp, which was hissing behind Khalid's shoulders.

Khalid got up: there was an accompanying rustle of clothing and creaking of joints, and the whole company rose while Khalid greeted Parsons and beckoned over his shoulder to a slave, who brought water in a copper ewer and washed Parsons' feet. When the ceremony was over Khalid seated Parsons at his right hand, and the assembly sank into position, the men adjusting their robes about them as they sat, like broody birds of prey settling on their nests. There was absolute silence.

Physically, Parsons now felt comfortable enough. He was sitting on a soft rug, with cushions at his back. Stealing a glance at Khalid, he saw that the sheikh was sitting erect, staring straight in front of him and looking haughty,

faintly contemptuous of everyone, regally composed. With a sinking of the spirit Parsons knew that he was in for a formal occasion similar to the one he had attended as the guest of Sahail Ahmed's father. The only difference apparently was that this was on a larger scale. He sighed gently.

After perhaps five minutes Khalid clapped his hands again, and slaves came in carrying great mats of raffia, four slaves to a mat piled with steaming food, which was laid out inside the rectangle of men. The centrepiece of each mat was some sort of animal, sheep or goat, Parsons decided, roughly dismembered, and surrounded by heaps of rice and sultanas.

Khalid dug with his right hand into the mess in front of him, and at this signal everyone else fell on the food, gobbling with silent intensity. Khalid extracted a goat's testicle, and offered it to Parsons, placing it in front of the Englishman. Parsons grinned palely, then, remembering to use his right hand, dug out an eye and put it before Khalid, thinking that two could play at this game. Khalid popped the eye into his mouth and swallowed it like an oyster; meanwhile Parsons scooped rice over the testicle, swallowed some rice, and returned the testicle to the main mass of food while reaching for a piece of nameless horror to give to Khalid. He did the same with the eye which Khalid gave him; and the two men continued to ply each other with food, Parsons gradually accumulating a pile of edible meat—bits of liver, kidneys, tongue—before him, and slipping the more grotesque delicacies back again as he took rice or sultanas. These, together with the liver and kidneys, were surprisingly good, and Parsons began to enjoy his meal.

Khalid ate steadily, fat sliding from the corners of his mouth, his smile all benignity as he selected titbits for Parsons, who reflected with incredulity on the sheikh's behaviour over Abdullah. Yet he looked again and saw the cold eyes above the smile: eyes which were deep but

callous and indifferent to such things as the death of a slave.

Parsons wondered why he had let the moment of Abdullah's death pass with so little protest, and was forced to acknowledge his own cowardice. He had never thought of himself as a coward. Looking back he could recollect several occasions on which he felt he had distinguished himself. He had been under fire in Korea, had rescued the limbless, moaning bundle of bloody rags that had been his platoon sergeant in the teeth of the Chinese rifle and mortar fire; had got a mention in dispatches for it. Earlier, as an undergraduate, he had rescued a woman from drowning, diving from his rowing boat into muddy, weedy water and hauling the fat, retching creature to the bank, where he had pumped the water out of her and made off without giving his name when enough passers-by had collected to ensure that the situation was under control. And yet, over Abdullah, he had been a coward. It seemed to him that the pattern of his life was that of rescuing: the platoon sergeant, the drowning woman. The oryx, too, ultimately. But he had failed to rescue Abdullah. True, he had never really had a chance, since Khalid had acted before Parsons had known what he was about; but he told himself that he should have foreseen it—the casual stride forward, the dispassionate scrutiny, the sudden stroke of the knife: each of these stages leading to Abdullah's death was clear in retrospect. Why not during the event? He wondered if perhaps there was some watershed in a man's life, between bravery and poltroonery. Meanwhile, he munched his rice and meat and sultanas, and smiled politely in reply to Khalid's empty smiles.

When Parsons felt he could eat no more, he went through the motions of eating by taking merely a few grains of rice into his mouth, like a non-singer moving his lips without sound during the hymns at a church service. The other guests were still feeding. Even if Khalid's formality had relaxed to the point of permitting conversation they would have been incapable of it as they stuffed great balls of rice into their mouths. The meat had all been finished lower down the company, but there was still plenty of rice. The only sound was of sucking, slobbering, smacking of lips, belches, and occasional groans as a man forced more food into an already distended belly.

Khalid waved a hand, and the food which remained was whipped away from beneath the outstretched claws of the guests. No one dared complain. Khalid rose, and with him Parsons; the others all stood up in their turn. Khalid beckoned Parsons to follow him, and they walked past the pressure lamp to a small room at the end of the hall, where slaves poured water. The two men washed in silence, Parsons taking pleasure in the removal of fat and grease from his fingers and face. Khalid motioned him to another door, and Parsons went through it obediently.

The far wall was non-existent; where it should have been was a wooden contraption extending beyond the outer wall of the fort. Parsons leaned over, and the smell which assailed him left him in no doubt. He was in the latrine. He used it gratefully, and then went back to the ante-room, where he washed again while Khalid went to the latrine. Soon the sheikh rejoined Parsons, and the two men went back into the hall. Slaves were busy sweeping up the fragments of meat and crumbs of rice which remained. The other guests had vanished like the food, suddenly spirited away.

Khalid and Parsons seated themselves again. Behind them, a slave pumped up the pressure lamp, and Parsons heard the clink of cups. The coffee pourer came. Khalid waved him away, asking rather testily for tea, but Parsons accepted the tiny cup with gratitude. He thought it better to wait, however, until Khalid's tea arrived before drinking any of the coffee, so he sat with the cup almost hidden in his hand. When the tea came they drank for-

mally. The slave who had been pumping the lamp sat with them, easily and without self-consciouness. The coffee pourer hovered in the background, together with the slaves who had been clearing the remains of the meal. Khalid barked commands, too rapidly for Parsons' understanding, and two of the slaves scuttled off.

'By God!' said Khalid. 'It is good for a man when he returns to his own people and his own house. Blessed be God.'

'Blessed be God,' Parsons said, hoping that it was the correct thing to say in the circumstances.

He offered Khalid a cigarette, and gave one to the slave also, wondering whether Khalid would disapprove. Apparently he did not. They smoked a while in silence, till one of the absent slaves returned with another man, small and ragged, with one fist held out at his side. On the fist was a hooded hawk.

'Are you fond of falconry, Mr Parsons?' Khalid asked. The slave helped himself to a cup of coffee and sat down, while the man with the hawk stood as immobile as the bird.

Parsons said uncomfortably, 'Well . . . I don't know. I have never tried.'

'Then you have never lived. The slave is Talib, and the hawk is Lila. They are yours.'

The man Talib bowed, and the hawk shifted the grip of its feet on the gauntlet.

Parsons said, 'But . . .' and relapsed into silence. He had the feeling that Khalid would be grossly offended if he were to refuse this gift, and he knew by now what would be the fate of a person who offended Khalid.

He swallowed, and began again.

'Your hospitality is peerless,' he said.

Khalid made a slight inclination of his head. Parsons felt the others looking at him, and then realized with a sudden shock that he was expected to reciprocate the gift. He felt sick. Of course! These Arab chieftains set

store on the exchange of gifts, and he had brought nothing with him that was remotely suitable. The Arabs waited quietly, intently.

Parsons, with sudden inspiration, unstrapped the watch

from his wrist, and proffered it.

Khalid took it gracefully but firmly, saying, 'I am unworthy of such a present,' as he stowed it away in his robes.

Only a gold bloody Rolex, Parsons thought. Two months' pay, that was all!

The rear door of the hall opened, and the second messenger appeared, leading three men, their arms filled with stick-like objects which Parsons could not at first see clearly against the lamplight. When they came close and dumped their burdens before the sheikh Parsons saw that they were rifles: single-barrelled, double-barrelled, modern machine carbines, ancient muzzle-loaders and jezails with short butts and enormously long damascened barrels.

'You are rather long in the arm,' said Khalid, appraising Parsons. 'Be so kind as to stand.'

Parsons stood while Khalid looked at him. At length the sheikh picked out a rifle.

'This should suffice,' he said.

Parsons said, 'That is a Short Model Lee Enfield. It is an old British Army rifle.'

He picked up the heavy rifle, took out the bolt, and squinted down the barrel at the light. It was like looking down a silver cone into an immeasurable distance, the faint foreshortened spiral of the rifling leading his eye round and along; the tang of gun oil in his nostrils seemed to take him back for a brief moment and then a series of moments in time. His father's voice said, 'There, John. Think that'll do?' in the gunroom on an autumn evening. His platoon sergeant's voice said, 'Look at this man's gun, sir: it's a bloody crime,' in a strongpoint by Pyongyang. He was back again in the gunroom at home, his

father dead, and he was battering the barrels of the once-precious guns one against the other, making quite certain that no one would ever use them again. Khalid's voice came from a far distance, and Parsons returned to himself.

'That is quite possible,' Khalid said. 'I thought it would suit you, but I was mistaken.'

He took the Lee Enfield and replaced it with a short light rifle, frowned, took another rifle, while Parsons felt like a man being measured for a suit, wondering what it was all about.

'There!' said Khalid at length. 'That is perfect.'

Parsons looked down at the gun he was holding. It was a Browning Olympian .30-06, with a beautifully chequered pistol-grip and fore-end, and a chased barrel.

'It is yours,' said Khalid.

'Good God!' Parsons said in English. At that instant, wrapped up in the past as he had been, the only significance the weapon had in the present was its value.

'I do not know how to acknowledge your generosity,' he said to Khalid. 'It is a princely gift.'

Khalid shrugged.

'One moment,' Parsons said desperately, and emptied the contents of his cigarette case into his left hand before giving the case to Khalid.

His gold watch and his gold cigarette case were his two most prized possessions, and he had parted with them in exchange for a hawk and a rifle, two instruments of hunting and of death; then, guiltily, he realized that he had left the man Talib quite out of account, except as an appurtenance of the hawk, a mere piece of furniture on which the hawk might sit.

Khalid rapped out another order, this time to Talib. The man paused a moment, his eyes narrowed, and then he bowed and left the room.

'Are you tired, Mr Parsons?' Khalid asked, waggling his third, empty teacup.

'No. . . . I mean yes.'

Parsons hesitated in confusion, and was relieved when Khalid said, 'Then I go to the women of my house,' and made his farewell. He left the room swiftly, and Parsons was conducted out of the hall by the slave who had brought him there. Parsons carried the rifle himself, for he knew instinctively that in the world into which he had thrust himself a man carried his own gun, even though he had not the slightest intention of using it. When he got back to civilization he would sell the damned thing, and buy a new watch and a new cigarette case. He thought of the oil-company settlement, and Marietta, as he walked with the slave back to his hut.

* * *

Parsons thought how strange it was that he owned a rifle, a hawk, and a man. He stared at Talib in some perplexity. Talib had been squatting outside Parsons' hut, though without the hawk. The slave left Parsons with Talib.

'Have you somewhere to sleep?' Parsons asked.
Talib said, 'Yes, I have somewhere to sleep, lord.'
Parsons said, 'Then go. Peace be upon you.'
Talib got up and said, 'And upon you be the Peace.'

Parsons stared after the man. It was intolerable, he thought, cursing himself. 'Then go,' he had said; and in those two words had assumed his power as a slave owner. What could he do? To send back Talib, to refuse the gift of man and hawk, would be to offer Khalid an insult of the most offensive sort. A rifle, that was easy, he told himself. All he had to do was to refrain from shooting, or shoot to miss if the need arose. At a pinch he could permit Talib to fly the hawk at game; after all, it would be for food and not for sport. That was the difference. But any order, even a wish lightly expressed to Talib by

Parsons, would be using a slave. Parsons stood a while, biting his lip. Eventually he decided that after all Talib was a servant, and he would need a servant. When the time came for Parsons to return to the Coast he would pay Talib handsomely for his services, with the man's freedom. He grinned with relief, believing that he had resolved his dilemma. Then he went into the hut.

A carbide lamp guttered low down on the wall, its light dimmed by the unreflecting surfaces of the carpets. Parsons stood by it and used its flame to light a cigarette, bent and crushed by its sojourn in the space above his belt between his body and his shirt. He took off his head-dress and hurled it at the bed, and then exclaimed.

There was a woman sitting on the bed, a veiled, gowned figure of indefinable age and shape, a mere mass of clothing with two hands.

'My God! Who are you?' said Parsons in English, and then adapted himself to the situation a little.

'Lady,' he recommenced. 'Mother of many medallions...'

The shape stood up, and made an obeisance.

'Lord,' she said, 'I am Farha,' and approached him until she was standing very close, her eyes gleaming behind the veil.

'Shall I remove my veil?' she asked.

Parsons said, 'Of course, if you wish. But—I do not understand.' He stubbed out the cigarette.

The woman took off her veil, and the flash of white teeth seemed to leap at Parsons after the anonymity of concealment. The woman was young, her face smooth, dusky, unlined, the nose small and straight, the eyes huge and dark.

'Aah!' she breathed. 'Now you can see me, sheikh of the Nazarenes. Do you like my face?

She pirouetted in front of him. She was wearing a number of crude silver necklaces, and when she stamped her feet there was a clashing sound, so presumably she

was wearing trinkets of some sort on her ankles, Parsons thought. He concluded that she must be a dancing girl.

'Did the lord Khalid send you to dance for me?'

Farha laughed.

'Dance? Yes, I can dance. I am a good dancer. Shall I do that?'

Without waiting for a reply she slipped out of her gown, and stood unclothed before him. Parsons' face was set in a nervous smile. Her figure was plump, ripe without excess fat. There were bracelets on her arms, and she wore brass anklets with various gew-gaws appended. The tinkling and clashing began again as she stamped and circled in front of him, her hips moving sinuously. The air was filled with a heavy scent of jasmine. Parsons' lips twitched, his smile vanished, and his mouth remained half-open. Farha came up to him, moving against him, a hand stroking the side of his jaw. He stood still, his hands at his sides, then closed his eyes like a man suddenly struck by sleep or a faint. He felt the girl's tongue on his closed eyelids, and his arms involuntarily embracing her, running up the flanks to the waist; then he was falling, struggling on the carpets, fighting, drowning in a hot sea of jasmine, then struggling and drowning again, and again.

6

FARHA. Parsons woke in the chilly early morning, the girl's name on his lips, but she had gone. He climbed stiffly out of the bed, beginning to shudder, and dressed in the Arab costume, hugging its draperies tightly about him.

The rifle was leaning against the wall of the hut, over by the now extinguished carbide lamp. Parsons went and picked up the rifle, hefting it in his hand. A rifle, a hawk, a man, a woman. Farha. The word meant Joy, but to Parsons that was a wholly inadequate term to describe her. He had never even considered the possibility of such pleasure as he had experienced. Farha. He was besotted with her, and his mind would hold nothing but her name.

Someone was calling, wailing the morning prayer. Parsons put down the rifle and lighted a cigarette, coughing a little and listening:

'God is great!

I believe that there is no god but God;

I believe that Muhammad is the Prophet of God.

Come to prayer, come to salvation,

For prayer is better than sleep:

God is great!'

But while his ears heard the prayer he was thinking of the girl. The wailing died away in the distance, and soon there came the normal noises of the village—shouts and laughter and the buzz of talk, the clatter of utensils. Camels groaned and coughed their way past the hut. He smelled woodsmoke and the odour of cooking and coffee. He was on the point of leaving the hut when Farha came in, veiled and shrouded, carrying a bowl of warm water and cloths.

'Lord,' she said, and placed the things on the floor in front of him, evading his grasp and leaving him before he could say anything. He washed, and then went round the back of the hut. When he returned he stood outside the entrance for a moment. Farha was nowhere to be seen. Up the track to his right there was a well at which veiled women were drawing water while children ran and shouted among them. An old man came past Parsons, leading a donkey. He spat at Parsons' feet and muttered something incomprehensible. Away to the left, through the palms, Parsons caught a glimpse of the fort, and, beyond, of the high dunes tinged with the rose of morning. He went back into the hut and wondered what he should do.

Was he invited to the fort for breakfast? He thought that this was unlikely, for Khalid had said nothing about it. But he was hungry. Surely Arabs must eat in the morning? He sighed, and lighted another cigarette, Farha occupying his thoughts.

They had talked a good deal during the night, Parsons lying with his head pillowed on Farha's shoulder. She had been vivacious even in their eventual satiety, curious about him, his country, his home, the customs of his people, of whom she knew next to nothing. He had answered her questions patiently, but had been reminded of the last occasion when he had fallen off his chair in the classroom. Farha took in his answers, but he sensed that she was not really relating them to him at all. Her personality, her vitality, made her seem interested even when she was merely absorbing information.

One thing worried him a little in retrospect. Farha had been talking of Parsons' general prowess, and she had mentioned the rifle which Khalid had given him.

'You must be a great hunter, lord,' she had said. 'But why did you not bring your own guns with you?'

Parsons had kissed her nose and told her to go to sleep. Farha had pouted and said, 'It is no matter. With God you will shoot many oryx with the rifle which the lord Khalid has given you.'

Parsons had sat up in surprise.

'Shoot oryx? But who says that I am going to shoot them?'

'Oh, everybody knows that you are a famous hunter, even though you are an unbeliever.'

She had giggled and added, 'Many of the old women think it is a disgrace to me to come to an infidel. But what could I do when I was commanded? And the young women will envy me when I tell them about you.'

Parsons had said blankly, 'But I am not going to shoot oryx. I want to save the oryx from being shot. That is why I am here. I detest shooting.'

Farha had levered herself on to an elbow and said, very slowly, 'Oh. You do not want to shoot anything?' She tugged his hair and said, playfully, 'Not even a hare?'

'No.'

Tug.

'Not even a lizard?'

'No.'

She had clicked her tongue and said, 'That is a great pity,' and rolled over to sleep.

Parsons' recollections were interrupted by the entry of his guide of the previous evening. The man greeted him briefly, and said, 'The sheikh is in session,' standing aside for Parsons to precede him through the door. Farha had still not reappeared, and Parsons felt rather dejected, as if he and the girl had been a married couple and she had failed in her duty of seeing him off.

Khalid was sitting alone in his hall in the fort when Zaid, the Nubian eunuch who supervised the women's quarters, came in with Farha. The girl ran forward and clasped the sheikh's knees, while he motioned Zaid out of earshot. Zaid obeyed, waddling to a corner, where he squatted with his hands folded on his paunch, and a soft smile. He knew everything: everything about Khalid. about Parsons, about Khalid's four wives and thirty concubines and eleven daughters, and everything about the twenty-odd other women, young and old, who lived in the household. He knew more about women than the most prepotent male who had ever lived. He knew all about Farha. Why should he want to listen? He would know the details of the conversation in due course, back in the women's quarters. Farha would reveal them willingly. No woman kept anything from Zaid after he had once persuaded her that frankness was better than secreev. He had his methods: a prickly pear instead of a lover, a cunning twist of the breast, the offer of a bath in boiling water. They told him everything, but, even so, he never used his knowledge, because it satisfied him for its own sake; he would pore over it endlessly in his mind like a priest telling beads or a miser counting coins, and that was enough. So he sat, and smiled, and dozed.

Khalid's face was quite expressionless as Farha told her story. When she had finished he signed to her to stand up. Then he questioned her closely.

'You are quite certain?' he persisted.

'Yes, oh yes, lord. quite certain. Lord . . . ?'

She was shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

'Well?'

'Lord, your promise. You will arrange matters now, about ...?'

She cringed before him.

Khalid said, 'Bitch, I made no promise. But I will see what may be done, perhaps. It is with God. I may need your services again with this Nazarene.'

Farha lifted her head suddenly, and Khalid must have interpreted her movement as a gesture of defiance.

'You will do whatever I command you to do,' he said

flatly. 'Now go. You begin to weary me.'

At his sign Zaid came forward and led Farha out, while Khalid sat alone stroking his beard, eyes half-closed. He was still sitting there when men began to enter the hall, Parsons among them. Khalid made a great show of geniality towards Parsons, seating him with elaborate courtesy while the others glanced covertly at Parsons, whispering among themselves. The session was informal. Coffee and tea were poured, with much clattering of cups, and conversation buzzed through the smoke of cigarettes, while Khalid chatted with Parsons. At first he talked of nothing in particular, with the Arab's skill in saying nothing in a great many words. Only once did he say anything which could have been construed as a reference to Farha.

'Did you spend a pleasant night, Mr Parsons?' he in-

quired suavely.

Parsons was at a loss for a reply. He assumed that Farha had been sent to him by Khalid's order, but he did not know where he stood for all that. Was the girl now his, a gift like the rifle, the hawk, and Talib, or was she merely lent for the occasion? He wanted desperately to find out, for he had to admit to himself that he desired Farha again on any terms, including those of master and slave. At the back of his mind he sensed that this was the crack in his armour of principle. He could refuse to avail himself of the hawk and the rifle, could treat Talib with the courtesy due to a servant, and free him when the time came. But Farha he had to have, at no matter what cost. He thought of Marietta. Their affair now seemed a thing of milk and water, for, he told himself, he had tasted wine for the first time, and knew that he would remain thirsty for it always. Notwithstanding, he kept himself from asking Khalid the questions that nagged at him, and told Khalid that he had spent a very pleasant night indeed.

They chatted for a little while longer. Beneath the easy talk Parsons sensed something which disquieted him, though there was nothing that he could pin down. It occurred to him with dismay that perhaps he had been expected to refuse Farha. But how could that have been? Khalid would have been insulted at the refusal of the hawk, or of the rifle. No, he decided, in Khalid's world Parsons had been honoured by the hospitality symbolized by Farha. That could not be the trouble. Perhaps Khalid was slightly off-colour. But whatever it was, there was something.

Khalid said, 'Well, Mr Parsons, everything is arranged. You will leave late this afternoon. Talib will make everything ready for you, and your riding camel will be under his care. Your hawk will be looked after in Talib's absence.'

Parsons was astonished.

'This afternoon?'

He had thought that he would have at least one more night at Ain al Mabsout before the expedition set off. One more night with Farha.

Khalid said, 'Among my people it is the custom to make the first day's journey a very short one. Then if it is found that anything has been forgotten it is an easy matter to return for it. To find that you had forgotten something when you were deep in the Sands might mean death, Mr Parsons.'

Parsons said, 'Yes, I see.'

So he would not know that night the inexpressible delight of Farha's presence. Neither would he know by her absence that he was not to see her again; and he took a little consolation from this.

'It is a good custom,' he said. 'And my holiday is not a very long one.'

'No,' said Khalid. 'Your time is short.'

* * *

The caravan moved off in the afternoon, in a cool north-easterly wind. Khalid stood and watched them go. Parsons did not turn to look back, being preoccupied by the problem of staying on his camel. He set his face towards the high dunes where the oryx were presumably to be found. But had he not heard somewhere that they preferred the gravel? Ah well, the Arabs knew best, he decided, and soon found himself thinking not of the oryx but of Farha.

7

Parsons was in agony. He sat on his camel, perched on a block the upper surface of which was sheepskin, and he neither knew nor cared what was under that. His companions rode with assured balance, kneeling with supple ease, their buttocks resting on the soles of their feet. Parsons found it impossible to assume this position, and he had to sit with his legs hanging down over the edges of what passed for a saddle. All feeling had long since left his legs, except for the raw patches on the insides of his thighs; and his back was a white-hot rivet, the head of which seared his kidneys while the other end drove into the base of his skull. What made it worse was that everybody was talking, shricking, laughing, and quarrelling, and taking no notice of him at all. Surely they could see that he was in pain? Why didn't they stop for a rest? But the camels moved on, bubbling and groaning, with a sort of inconsequential inevitability, cropping leaves from bushes in passing, never seeming to hurry, but covering a surprising amount of ground none the less.

Parsons was paying for the trip, or at least subsidizing it, for he had paid Khalid fifty pounds in Maria Theresa dollars—the universal Arabian currency among the desert men—before leaving the Coast. There were nine men in the party, all told, and twelve camels, two of which carried water and farinaceous food, while the third was loaded with miscellaneous baggage. The riding camels also carried small loads—a water skin, a bag of food—in addition to their riders.

The camels drifted on, but Parsons became aware that riders were slipping from their backs and walking, hold-

ing their rifles over their shoulders by the muzzles, while their other hands held their flimsy camel canes and the beasts' headropes. Talib came over to him, halted Parsons' camel, and couched it while Parsons hung on grimly till the rocking and lurching had ceased.

'Now we are on sand, it is better for the camels if we walk a little,' Talib said.

Parsons slid off the camel's back with a gratitude too deep for words. Khalid spoke to Parsons' camel which roared and moaned and creaked to its feet. It coughed a cud of green slime over Parsons' headcloth and robe, and shambled on. Parsons left the mess where it was: it would dry, and anyway, what did it matter? He trudged along with Talib at his side, their camels whining gently to each other.

The sand got between his toes and balled under the soles of his feet on his sandals, so he took off the sandals and stuffed them into a saddlebag. He carried his rifle at the trail, and began to curse it inwardly because of its weight.

In contrast to the rest of the men, Talib spoke little. He certainly showed none of the cringing deference which Parsons had expected a slave would show, and this led Parsons, who knew nothing of the conditions of Arab slavery, to wonder whether he had offended the man in any way. He was forced to realize that what he had thought of before was the abstract idea of slavery: he had accorded it the lip-service abhorrence of the Westerner without ever having thought of slaves as living, breathing people. Slaves lived in history books. Abdullah had changed that notion; but now that Parsons himself owned a slave, he knew uneasily that he was a little disappointed because Talib did not measure up to his romanticized conception of a slave's behaviour. Parsons had to acknowledge that in reality he was in complete ignorance of what that behaviour should be. Khalid's slaves apparently enjoyed a status of social equality after their work was done; the slaves sat around drinking coffee with the free men, talking and joking with them. It was all very odd. It was, of course, wrong of him to expect Talib to come creeping to him, attending to his every want with deep obeisances: slavery was still an evil. Yet he now knew uncomfortably that if he had been born into a society which used slaves, he would have availed himself gladly of this power over other men.

The north-easterly wind hardened as the evening drew near. Parsons' feet were becoming sore, and he shivered with cold. He thought of the burning deserts of his imagination, and lusted in his mind after sunshine and heat. But the wind blew steadily from the massed leaden clouds away to his right, and he plodded on with Talib, a silent pair among the babble of the others.

They stopped, and Parsons sat down like a sack.

Talib said, 'I am going hunting,' hobbled Parsons' camel and his own, and strode away, seemingly as fresh as ever.

The sands were drifted into low, undulating dunes among which ran tongues of white gypsum flanked by salt bushes and dead shrubs with trailing roots like tentacles sprawling over the tawny sand. These the Arabs began to gather for fuel, while the hobbled camels munched the leaves and twigs from the bushes.

Two Arabs were receiving the fuel, and building a fire. Others turned to unloading bags of food and water skins.

One of the fire-builders said to the other, 'By God! Suleiman, it will be good to drink coffee tonight.'

Parsons thought that he had better be sociable, and got up painfully. He joined the men, thinking of coffee with eager anticipation.

The second Arab bellowed, 'That is the truth, by God!'
He noticed Parsons and added, 'Adem, the unbeliever
has come to sit with us.'

Parsons said, 'Coffee? You are making coffee?'

Suleiman was a ragged, small man with the nose of a Nubian goat and a sparse black beard.

He grinned, exposing broken teeth, and said, 'Assuredly, soon we shall make coffee, Nazarene.'

Adem said, 'I could kill a man for a cup of coffee.'

Parsons agreed.

The three men sat considering, but no one made a move to light the fire. Parsons took out a box of matches, then hesitated.

Suleiman said, 'Matches? The unbeliever has matches!' Adem, spare, broken-nosed, moustachioed, said, 'The unbeliever is of great wealth,' and took the matches from Parsons' hand.

Thank God! thought Parsons. Now he'll light the fire. But Adem made no movement, squatting with the matchbox held loosely in fingers like long brown twigs.

Parsons got out his cigarettes, and offered the carton to Adem and Suleiman, but retaining a firm grip on it. They each took a cigarette; Parsons placed one between his own lips and was about to stow the carton away when another Arab appeared and took one of Parsons' cigarettes. This happened again and again, until each of the Arabs had a cigarette. Parsons saw that two remained in the carton.

'Perhaps we could have a light,' he suggested bitterly to Adem, as everyone sat round to enjoy his smoke.

Adem lighted the cigarettes, and the Arabs grunted in unison, exhaling contentedly. Still no one made a move to light the fire; the men shouted amongst themselves. One of them had a dog, which had followed the man's camel all day. He was fondling the dog and calling it by pet names.

Parsons said in surprise, 'You have a dog. I thought that dogs were unclean.'

The Arab said fiercely, 'A dog? This is not a dog: it is a saluki!'

Parsons said, 'But a saluki is a dog, surely.'

The Arab sighed, and explained patiently, 'It is a saluki, and a saluki is not unclean. Dogs are unclean. How then could this be a dog?'

Somebody said, 'These unbelievers are slow in the wits. A saluki a dog, indeed!'

Suleiman said, 'There is a superficial resemblance, of course. But you might as well say that a Muslim is an unbeliever, by God!'

Everyone murmured, scandalized: 'God forbid!' 'Aaih! The Arrow of the Almighty—may it pass over!' 'O Camel of the Lord!'

Parsons kept quiet, and soon the men were talking among themselves again. His first effort at conversation had not exactly been a success, he decided.

Adem was holding forth importantly, with gestures of his camel cane, shaking Parsons' matchbox from time to time in order to emphasize various points in his discourse. One might have been forgiven for thinking that some momentous subject was being discussed.

'And I told him that I had had it from Salim, who sold it to me for two riyals. That was before the Beni Gersh killed him, over towards the Wadi al Mish: he shot three of them, may God strike them all dead with our help! But Massallim said that I had been cheated. Cheated, me! And by Salim. I ask you, friends! I said to him, "By God, Massallim, I have walked a hundred miles to show you this, and now you say that I was cheated when I acquired it. Here, take it," and I gave it to him. I said, "Offer me a hundred riyals, Massallim, two hundred, and I will not take them. It is yours for nothing." He paused dramatically, and said, 'That is what I did. I gave it him!'

'Before God, you are a generous man,' someone said.
'Did he then offer you the two riyals?'

Adem looked crestfallen, and said, 'No, he did not. He took it. And it was the best pigeon-string I have ever

seen: it was worth at least half a riyal. I ought to know—I made it myself!'

The light was beginning to fade. Parsons was by this time near to fainting with hunger and thirst. He said, after a while, 'Are we never going to have this coffee?'

'What is the matter?' asked Suleiman. 'Are you thirsty?'

Parsons said, 'Yes, by God.'

Suleiman said to the others, 'What do you think? Shall we light the fire?'

The hubbub ceased for a moment while the Arabs considered, and then broke out with redoubled volume as they debated the question. Eventually they reached a decision, and Adem lighted the fire with Parsons' matches, keeping them afterwards. A pot was set to boil, and in due course it did so. Adem then set it to simmer at one side of the fire.

In the deepening dusk Parsons said to Suleiman, 'Why do you delay? The coffee can be made now. The water has boiled.'

'That is true,' said Suleiman. 'Yes, it has boiled.'

He looked away evasively.

'Then why not make the coffee?'

Suleiman said resignedly, 'Very well, it shall be as you wish. I will make coffee.'

He did so, and at length set the tiny cup in front of

Parsons, saying, 'There is your coffee.'

Parsons drank the scalding tot in one searing draught, feeling the tiny quantity of liquid begin to spread warmth at once in his chilled body. Then he noticed that the others were looking at him with stony faces, harsh in the flickering firelight.

'What is it?' he asked. 'Why do you not drink?'

'Talib is hunting,' Adem said.

'Well? What difference does that make? I do not understand.'

'It seems that there is much you do not understand,' Adem said with contempt in his voice. 'Talib is hunting.

Can he drink coffee while he is hunting? How then can we drink coffee until our comrade comes to join us? Are we women or old men, or unbelievers, that we cannot wait for Talib?'

Parsons knew that he should say nothing, but he was angry, and his anger overcame his caution to bring further disgrace on him.

He said, 'Talib is my slave. I can drink coffee without him if I choose.'

Suleiman said coldly, "Talib is a slave, and I am illegitimate, and you are a dog of an unbeliever. It is fitting that you should drink alone, lest you defile those who are men."

Suleiman had a hand on his dagger, casually. Adem put a restraining hand on Suleiman's shoulder, and whispered to him, while Parsons sat numbly, waiting for death.

There was a cry far off, and everyone leaped to his feet, safety catches clicking. The cry was repeated.

'It is Talib.'

Parsons was forgotten for the moment. Two men ran off into the darkness, and in a few minutes returned with Talib. The slave was puffing but triumphant, carrying a gazelle across his shoulders, blood from its slit throat running down his arm.

'God has sent us meat,' he said, and sat down unconcernedly next to Parsons, his back to the gazelle as if it had nothing to do with him at all. Two men started to butcher the carcass, the process being interrupted during prayers; but at length the meat was roasting over the fire, and all the men, at long last, began to drink coffee.

Suleiman, his earlier anger apparently quite forgotten, topped up Parsons' cup with an affable smile. Someone else baked bread, and soon Parsons was nibbling a warm flat fragment while he waited for the meat. The bread was sour and sandy, but it was food at least. His eyes closed, and he began to nod, bread still in his mouth;

then he jerked awake, feeling ridiculous and knowing that the Arabs missed nothing that he did.

He had no idea how to rehabilitate himself in their eyes, and finally persuaded himself that it did not matter what they thought of him, as long as they led him to an oryx. But as he sat under the stars in this naked and empty land, he began to realize the reason for the strict formality of the Arabs' code. Of course it had a social purpose in that it cemented the solidarity of the group; but it had a personal reason, too. These men had so few possessions that they compensated for it by carrying their formal honour with them like furniture, he decided: they sat in it, spread it around them, encased themselves within its walls like a house. And he knew now that he could never gain admission. The world of the Arab as he had conceived it and as it was in reality were utterly different. All he could do was to use these men, these alien inhabitants of what was virtually another planet, to find his oryx. It never occurred to Parsons that his failure might lie in his own behaviour. He knew in some deep inner recess of his mind that there was something to be admired in their conduct, but to acknowledge it would have been to strip away the last rag of his self-esteem. He would have thrown even that away for Farha; but not for these Arabs.

When the gazelle was cooked they drew lots for portions and then ate to bursting point, and Talib sat with Parsons, picking out delicacies for him. Afterwards Parsons lay in his sleeping bag, shivering and with a pain in his stomach. The camels had been barracked in a rough square on the outer perimeter of the fire, and inside them the men slept deeply, their snores mingling with the grunts and groans of the camels. One of the camels delivered itself of a belch which seemed to go on for ten minutes, and Parsons wished that he had been capable of wind-breaking on that scale. Soon, however, he fell asleep, to wake at intervals during the night with cold

and pain, rousing finally in a bitter dawn with an occasional spatter of raindrops borne on a gusty wind.

* * *

They moved on into the emptiness, the undulating sands gradually becoming higher, and the gradients more difficult. The vegetation became restricted to scanty patches far apart, and the Arabs took every opportunity to let their camels graze. It was this grazing as much as anything, Parsons felt, which determined the line they were taking on their journey. On three occasions the Arabs pointed out tracks which they said were those of oryx, but each time they advanced some reason for not following them. The tracks were too old, or they led into dunes which were too high. When Parsons said that he had understood that oryx did not like the high dunes, they became resentful and surly. If he knew all about the oryx, why did he need them to guide him?

By the fourth day Parsons was beginning to wish that he had never heard of oryx. He was tired, and physically weak as a result of travelling hard on rations, the gazelle apart, which were either inadequate or unsuited to a man used to a European diet. The staple was sandy rice and sandy flour, of which the Arabs made their flat cakes of bread. Parsons suffered from flatulence and gas-pains all the time. He had been given to understand that, though it was quite permissible to belch, to break wind publicly in the other direction was unseemly, and in consequence of this he suffered torments.

The Arabs treated Parsons as a necessary encumbrance. They made no allowance for his nationality, his hunger, his thirst, his pain. He had to learn perforce to drink when they drank, to eat when they ate. The strain on Parsons was almost too great to bear, but he stuck it doggedly, enduring the discomfort, the lack of privacy, and the noise. He knew that the famous Arabian travel-

lers, men like Doughty and Thomas and Philby and Thesiger, had managed to come to terms with the Arab way of existence, living with desert men for months on end. How they had done this was beyond Parsons' comprehension. He had come to the conclusion that the only method of retaining his sanity lay in preserving his identity as a European, in remaining outside events as an observer, in abandoning the hopeless attempt to adapt his mind to that of the Arabs, even though physical conformity was forced upon him.

On the evening of the fifth day the wind increased in intensity, and then dropped. In a little while light airs began to blow from the south, and this was a blessed relief to Parsons. It seemed to release tension among the Arabs also, for they relaxed to the extent of bringing Parsons into their conversation: that interminable and rambling, raucous interchange of reminiscence and argument about money, women, camels, raiding. Before they went to sleep that night Talib gave Parsons a small dagger as a present, and Parsons was touched. He thought that it had been a good idea to keep his mind free of Arab ways of thinking; obviously, the Arabs were now acknowledging him as an individual in his own right-different from them, but not necessarily inferior-and Talib's gift set the seal on his rehabilitation. Comforted, he slept that night deeply and dreamlessly. When he awoke the next morning the north-easter was back again; but the Arabs had gone.

They had gone. Parsons ran up to the top of the nearest dune, scrambling and sobbing, his legs moving with short piston strokes which resulted in a slow-motion progress up the face of yielding sand. There was no one in sight; nothing. He went back to the camp, the gasping of his breath quietening. The north-east wind blew in squally bursts, and he found that the intermittent buffeting made it difficult for him to think clearly. He sat down on his bedroll, and fumbled for a cigarette. When it was between his lips he looked for matches, and found none.

'Swine!' he yelled, and immediately remembered that he must retain his self-control. His life depended on it.

They seemed to have left nothing. He had his bedroll—a sleeping bag with waterproof hood and cover, the clothes he was wearing, and the few oddments he was carrying.

'Take it easy now,' he told himself.

He turned out his possessions on the bedroll. A hand-kerchief, a few Maria Theresa dollars, a comb. Talib's dagger, which he hurled furiously away. Cigarettes, but no matches. A dried-out cigarette lighter, but no fuel. He cursed. He could have refilled the lighter from one of Khalid's vehicles before leaving: why hadn't he thought of that? No food. No water. They had left him to die.

The thought filled him with rage. He leaped to his feet again and started over to the fire, to see if there was any life in it. He tripped over something on the ground and looked down. It was his rifle. Picking it up, he looked at it wonderingly. Then he slid back the bolt. The rifle was loaded with one cartridge. He snapped the bolt shut, and

adjusted the catch to 'safe.' Then he made the bedroll into a bundle, lugging it over his shoulder by one of the straps. He carried the rifle at the trail in his other hand, and moved off in the tracks left by the Arabs. He was determined to trail them, close with them, and shoot somebody whatever the consequences might be. Talib, preferably. How had Talib dared leave him?

Parsons moved at first in a shambling trot. The trail was easy to follow, but he knew that he had to move fast: the rambling progress of the camels seemed slow, but they went as fast as a man could walk; and now the Arabs might be pressing their beasts, allowing them no time to stop and graze. If he only knew what start they had over him.

He was fit enough, basically, but his resources had been depleted by the journey, and soon he was panting hoarsely. The weather was becoming bitterly cold, and even while he was jog-trotting along Parsons felt its chill cutting into him. The going was extremely difficult, and soon he had the sensation of running in the sort of dream in which one makes no progress at all. He had to halt.

He threw himself on the sand, staring in front of him and feeling his heart banging away. The wind increased further; sand blew over his outstretched arms, burying the fingers and the wrists. He sat up, with a sudden feeling of panic. Even though it was cold, he was becoming thirsty. His mouth was dry and his throat sore after running. He must get water somehow. He stood up, and moved forward at a walk, working his mouth and tongue in an effort to produce saliva.

The tracks were disappearing, sand blowing over them and erasing them. Parsons gave a loud cry and ran forward again, stumbling and peering as the tracks became fainter and fainter. He ran for perhaps half an hour, and then fell down; the wind and the sand blew over him while he moved his legs like an insect; then the movements ceased.

When he awoke Parsons was half-buried by the sand. He sat up jerkily, not knowing for a moment where he was. Then he stood up, still clutching the rifle, and passed a hand over his eyes. His head ached, and he blinked owlishly, trying to swallow, his body racked by a fit of shuddering. All the tracks had vanished.

He moved on all day, slowly, often falling and lying still for varying periods of time, of which he had lost all count. Towards evening he heard the sound of thunder from the north. At nightfall he crawled into the sleeping bag and fell asleep at once. In the night he awoke, hearing the sound, he thought, of many horsemen. No. It was a crowd applauding. No. It was . . .

Parsons came fully awake, poked his head out of the hood of his sleeping bag. It was raining; great drops spattered down, drumming on the ground and on the sleeping bag. He lifted his face to the sky, trying to catch the raindrops with his mouth. Water!

A minute later he wriggled out of the sleeping bag. Working with his back to the wind he turned the bag over, reversing the hood so that the waterproofing lay inwards. He stood, soaking and shivering, while the rain ran from the back of the sleeping bag and down into the hood. He had to face the wind eventually to allow the maximum amount of water to hit the bag. When perhaps half a pint of water had collected he drank greedily, and then set himself to get more. He was shivering so violently that he thought he would break a bone; his teeth chattered, and his head shook from side to side. The rain moderated, then stopped, but for a long time afterwards Parsons still stood there holding the sleeping bag.

When he realized at length that it was raining no longer, Parsons shouted and laughed for a time. He drank the rest of the water: a little less than a pint. Then he took off all his clothes and spread them on the ground, crawling naked into the sleeping bag.

'I'm fly,' he said to the bag. 'A fly bird. They think they've got me, but they don't know I'm fly.'

He began to move along the ground inside the sleeping bag, then remembered the rifle. He could not leave that behind. Nor his clothes.

'What am I doing?' he said. 'It's bloody well dark.'

He lay still, eyes open, his shivering gradually lessening. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and had got one in his mouth when he realized that he had no pocket and no cigarette because he had no clothes on.

'Here, steady,' he said. 'That won't do.'

But the cigarette was there. Or was it? He felt his mouth with his fingers and sighed with relief when he found nothing.

'Bloody dreaming,' he said.

If he could have dreamed a light for the cigarette it would have been fine. He could have dreamed a smoke. He tried, but it was no good any longer. Perhaps he could dream Marietta. Or Farha. Farha, that was it. But that was no good either.

'All shot up,' he said. 'I'm all shot up, Mummy.'

He cried a little then. He had earache, and his mother let him sleep with her in her bed. He was five, and he lay snuggled close against his mother, listening to her regular breathing, her warm silk nightdress and body his bulwark, a hot-water bottle under the pillow against his cheek. The bedside lamp was on, and peeping from under the coverlet he could see the radiant cloud of his mother's hair, and beyond and to one side the gleaming polished walnut of the bed head. There was a unicorn in the room, he knew that perfectly well. But where? He found his mother's hand and isolated a finger, clinging to it. He knew the unicorn was there because he had seen it so often in his dreams. There was a movement behind him, by the door, and he froze, holding his breath, waiting. It was just inside the door. He heard a click. It would be standing there, white and shining, with a golden horn and great kind eyes. If he held his breath a little longer, it would be there. . . . There was another swift movement; something gripped him and turned him; he screamed, and looked up into his father's face. His mother sat up, startled, and his father said, 'My God! He'd stopped breathing. I thought . . .' He paused and let go, and then said, 'Earache gone? All right, cut along back to your own room. Silly little blighter,' and sent him to his own cold bed, where he sat up with hands clasped round his knees. staring at the shadows on the wall. Then he went to sleep.

Parsons knew that it was light, and then it was dark again. He got up twice, dazed, and carefully reversed the hood of the sleeping bag before urinating into it, but each time it spilled away because, having used the hood as a container, he then turned it right way round and got

back into the bag, and went to sleep again.

He thought he had better get up. It was daylight. He coughed a good deal as he climbed finally out of the bag. He collected his clothes, which were dry, and put them on. Then, staggering slightly, he rolled up the sleeping bag and picked up the rifle. Then he put the bag down and examined the rifle carefully.

The muzzle was choked with sand. Sergeant Matthews wouldn't like that.

'Matthews,' he said. 'Just look at this gun. Bloody disgrace.'

He looked down the muzzle, then stopped hastily.

'Oops,' he said. 'Stupid. One up the spout.'

He extracted the cartridge, removed the bolt, shook the rifle. A lot of sand fell out. Parsons put back the bolt and reloaded the rifle.

He walked on, under a gunmetal sky, his left cheek to the wind. From time to time he stumbled into bushes whose thorns scratched him and whose exposed roots tripped him. Each time he fell he lay motionless for a while, and then slowly got to his feet, still clutching the rifle and the bedroll. He thought it odd how his situation kept changing. Sometimes he was on his way to rejoin his unit in Korea, walking in the north wind that killed men at their posts. He had defeated the wind then by walking for a long, long time with his back to it, past the napalm-charred corpses, hearing the scream of jets over his head and the dying sound of small-arms fire and Chinese bugle-blasts in the distance. Then in the mauve light of evening he came to what had been a hut and was three crumbling walls, with an old man in a high-crowned hat sitting in their shelter. He had sat down with the man in silence, and they had smoked a cigarette each. Afterwards Parsons got up and turned back north, arriving at the strongpoint in the small hours of the morning. Sergeant Matthews had said, 'Thank God you're back! I thought you'd deserted, sir!' and Parsons had managed to laugh and pass off his absence. Matthews was killed the following day.

Sometimes he was with his father, shooting duck on the local trout-stream. They had waited tense and still under the willows, the leaves whipped by the January wind and shimmering frosty and pale green. The light died, the wind still blew, but overhead in the dark sky at a hundred miles an hour with the wind came the mallard, talking amongst themselves domestically—the quack of the ducks, the soft reassuring breek-breek of the drakes -a parlour conversation. Then silence, and then the muted swish of wings turning upwind to land on the river. His father's gun; two plummeting silent ducks, one dead, the other brought back by Pip in a flurry of wing-beaten water. His father had said, 'Hold that torch steady, can't you?' and slammed the wounded bird's head against the ankle of his thigh boots. The wing-flurry had ceased, and the sky was silent except for the wind as they walked home through the gilbey with their feet crunching in the ice of the puddles and treading down the crisp frostbound grass.

Parsons lay down and watched a red, furry spider

disappear into the sand. His hand went out too late to try and catch it, for he would have eaten it had he been able. He had lain down, but in his mind he was still walking, and his feet twitched like those of a dreaming dog. He was walking to meet Farha, struggling up the steep leeward faces of the dunes, scrambling and rolling down the windward sides. She was behind the next dune, and the next, and the next. He got up, convinced that it would be so, soon, and moved on. Farha was not there. Try the next dune. They were not high, a mere sixty or eighty feet, but Parsons was moving so slowly and with such effort that the second dune took him two hours to surmount. He lay at the top and could see nothing for a while, each breath a raucous groan. Then he looked up, his vision clearing.

'Marietta,' he said, surprised. 'What you doing here?'

He went forward on all fours to greet her, but she had gone, and he stopped, his cracked lips open over dry teeth. Then he went back for the rifle and bedroll, which he carried like the honour of an Arab, at any price. He and the rifle and the bedroll got to the bottom of the dune.

'Hey . . .' He tried to say, 'Hey, where've you gone?' but only the first word came out. He could not shut his mouth: somehow his tongue had grown outwards between his upper and lower teeth. He tried with his fingers to thrust his tongue back into its proper shape, but it sprang back again like inflated plastic. It hurt.

He cried for a little while. Then Marietta was there again. It was dark, but he could see in the dark, and Marietta was there. Danvers was with her. Parsons was scared. He turned round, but they moved round too. He tried to undo the bedroll in order to creep in and hide, but could not make his fingers work properly. Then it didn't matter, because Danvers and Marietta had gone. Parsons fainted.

When morning came the wind had dropped completely.

Parsons must have moved about in the night, because it took him some time to find the rifle and the bedroll. He could not stand, and for perhaps an hour tried to move on all fours with his burdens, but progress was impossible. He picked up the rifle and dragged it with him for some distance, then went back for the bedroll and brought it up to the rifle. Then he rested, his tongue protruding between the cracked lips, his breath snoring through his nose. The effort of sitting up dislodged the bedroll, and it tumbled gently down to the bottom of the dune. Parsons tried to shoot it with the rifle, but he had left the safety catch on. He rejoined the bedroll. He carried it some way along the trough of the dune in a south-easterly direction, then brought the rifle up to it. By midday he reached the end of the dune, which petered out in flat sand and gypsum, on to which Parsons emerged like a beetle rolling its ball of dung in slow motion. He stopped, and lay across his burdens, shivering.

The wind came again, and Parsons would have screamed, but could not. He moved back into a sitting position, his face stung by the lifting sand-grains. As the sandstorm worsened, his protruding tongue became coated with sand; sand found its way into his head-dress and into his ears, into the slits of his eyes. Eventually Parsons keeled over sideways, and lay where he had fallen, the sand building up against his shoulders and beginning to cover his head.

He lay there, thinking of nothing at all at first, but at length disconnected images began to pass through his mind. He had ceased to feel pain, and was thinking of food and drink. He saw clearly a tankard of bitter beer, a tankard of pocked pewter, misted with the chill of the beer inside it. Roast pheasant his father had shot and his mother had prepared for the table. A steak of Wye salmon. A great wedge of Stilton. Port: Taylor's 1918, bottle of 1919. Fish-and-chips: the fish unknown and

humble, skate or dogfish, white and greasy and mouthfilling in its jacket of crisp golden batter, the odour of vinegar rising from the chips in the paper packet. An army pint mug of steaming tea laced with rum. A transport café sandwich: two doorsteps of fried bread enclosing a thick rasher of fried ham and a fried sausage. A quart of Hereford cider on a bench under the white torches of a chestnut, and a plate of Caerphilly cheese with chives.

Parsons was groaning quietly in a monotone, his eyes half-closed. Suddenly he rose to his feet with a convulsive movement, falling immediately headlong, his hand dropping the rifle as he fell, the waves of blown red sand undulating over him again through the air, until at last there came a lull in the malice of the storm. Parsons raised his head, opening his red-rimmed eyes and blinking painfully.

In front of him and to his right, passing his field of vision, was a white ghost. It was an oryx. Parsons shook his head, suddenly lucid. An oryx! It stepped delicately from the sand on to a spit of gypsum and paused, standing motionless with one hoof raised, exactly in the same position as the oryx Parsons had seen with Danvers and Marietta. Its white coat merged with the whiteness of the gypsum, so that Parsons, who found difficulty in keeping his eyes correctly focused, continually lost sight of the creature, each time experiencing a greater strain in holding it in his vision.

The beauty of the animal made Parsons catch his breath with grief. It was inexpressibly lovely; but it was blood, meat, life; and he was going to shoot it. His fingers groped through the sand, searching for the rifle, found it, closed on the barrel, dragging it towards him. He had accepted the rifle, the slave, and the woman. He could use the slave and the woman no longer, but the rifle was there under his hand, and there was no choice really, he told himself.

The oryx moved off unconcernedly. Parsons was almost covered by the drifted sand, his inching movements under it revealing nothing. He brought the rifle up to his shoulder with infinite caution, trying to make it grow there like a plant.

The oryx was perhaps as large as a donkey, but slimlegged and lithe, the straight horns pointing backwards as it sniffed the air. Parsons knew that he would have very little time from the moment he thumbed off the safety catch: the click of metal, that universal dangersignal, would start the oryx into flight at once. He would have to take a snap-shot.

He held his breath, then, quickly, he clicked the safety forward. Even as he worked the bolt with frantic speed, the oryx bounded away; Parsons had no time for thought, but took an instinctive lead as he squeezed the trigger and fired.

The report was muffled. Something odd happened to the barrel of the gun. The oryx disappeared, and Parsons stared bemusedly at the muzzle of his rifle, which had burst into an open formation resembling a half-peeled banana. He squinted grotesquely at the shards of metal, seeing the steel streaked with mica and silica. The gun had been choked with sand, and had burst.

Parsons sat up, his head in his hands, elbows on knees, the useless rifle cradled in his lap. He was trying to laugh, but succeeding in making only a bubbling noise. The oryx had come to rescue him, and he had tried to shoot it. But the rifle wouldn't do it. Funny, he thought, then pushed the rifle away and lay down as the sandstorm began again, though with rather less fury than before.

He drifted off into a semi-conscious state, sometimes realizing clearly that he was dying, falling slowly towards peace. His fantasies of human companionship, food, and drink left him; he became empty of desire and hatred and pain. Just before losing consciousness completely he

realized, with a detached, almost academic wryness, that the bullet in the rifle—the single cartridge—had been meant not for the oryx, nor for any other game than himself.

* * *

Talib was sitting in the lee of the two couched camels. On the abrupt dying away of the storm he yawned, then began to smoke a cigarette. Soon he would make coffee, but for the moment the cigarette was good. He smoked it through, and was about to light the fire when he heard the shot. He paused for a moment, considering, then gathered up the storm-scattered fuel and rebuilt the fire, lighting it and placing the battered water-pot to one side of the fierce flames.

As soon as the leading camel heard his command and felt his foot on her neck she began to rise, while Talib slipped into the saddle. The second camel, roped to the first, had to rise perforce, roaring and coughing. They moved off, taking a transverse path up the face of the nearest dune. Normally Talib would have walked his camel, but now he was in a hurry and urged her on fast. In three-quarters of an hour he was out of the dunes and racing over the hard white gypsum, noticing on one of the sand patches the tracks of an oryx heading east.

Talib knew that the storm would come again soon. When it did, he had to stop at once, couch the camels, and wait. If God willed it the water for his coffee would boil away, and the fire die down, and his tracks be wiped out. This last eventuality would be no great matter, for Talib knew this region of the desert in all circumstances, even after a sandstorm had modified the shapes of all the dunes. He always knew where he was, as an old-fashioned trawlerman can look at a heaving expanse of water and know where to shoot his trawl. He could find his way back to the little camp in any conditions; but

he would not move forward or back while the storm lasted, on account of the camels. So he sat, patiently, unworried, living through the storm.

It ceased finally in the late afternoon. Talib gave thanks to God and then, struck by a sudden thought, led the camels back to where the tracks of the oryx had been. To a Western eye nothing at all would have been visible, and there was little enough trace of the animal's passage for Talib to follow, save here and there a faint mark on harder ground. Talib back-tracked, leading the camels, losing the trail often and casting round in wide sweeps, quartering the ground, entering into the being of the oryx and knowing the path he would have taken if he had been the animal. In an hour and a half he reached the spot where Parsons lay, his head buried in the crook of his elbow.

Talib turned Parsons over and saw the rifle on which he had been lying. He picked it up and examined it, clicking his tongue at the waste of a good weapon. And, since the stock and the action were undamaged, he stowed the rifle in the saddlebag of the camel which had been Parsons'. Then Talib turned his attention to the man. He bent down and put his ear to Parsons' mouth.

'Truly,' he said, 'I thought you were dead.'

He fetched water and bathed Parsons' mouth, gently separating the tongue from the lips and teeth to which it was adhering, then bathing the eyes and nostrils, using the water frugally and efficiently, for it was no use pouring the precious stuff over a man who, if God willed it, would die.

Parsons opened his eyes, staring upwards.

Talib said, 'I came back to find you, lord. It came to me that I should not have left you. It was different for the others.'

Then, seeing that there was no recognition in Parsons' eyes, Talib lifted him on to his shoulders with surprising strength, for Parsons was three stones heavier than the

Arab. Talib slung Parsons over the second camel and roped him to it. He commanded the beasts to rise and led them away, finally mounting and travelling fast to reach his camp before darkness fell.

The fire was out, and the water had boiled dry, but Talib unloaded Parsons from the camel, couched both camels, and began patiently to remake the fire, putting on it another pot of water. When it boiled he made his coffee, and forced a little of the hot liquid into Parsons' mouth past the tongue and holding Parsons' nose. He gagged and coughed, but Talib persevered. Only when Talib judged that Parsons had taken in a sufficient quantity of the coffee did he drink a cup himself. In the gathering darkness he made up the fire and shifted Parsons closer to it. He knew that Parsons had possessed a bedroll, which would have been buried by the sandstorm, and there had been no time to search for it. When night fell and the fire began to die down, all the fuel having been consumed, Talib spread his own thin and tattered blanket over Parsons and then lay close to him, sleepless and shivering stoically, giving what little warmth he could

In the morning he broke camp and took Parsons back to Ain al Mabsout.

Someone was calling. Parsons mumbled, his eyes still closed, and flung out an arm, his fingers brushing something furry and yielding. He opened his eyes into a grey fog in which lights flickered and swam; then the fog dispersed and he found himself looking at a carpeted wall. Parsons closed his eyes again, but the voice persisted, and so he thought he had better see who it was. Soon. He sighed. It was not his mother, for though they had carpets on the floors at home, there were none on the walls. Perhaps he had fallen out of bed, and the bed had turned over sideways, so that what appeared to be the wall was the floor. This was a plausible idea, but he dismissed it, for had it been correct he would have been lying on the carpet and not in the bed. No. He was on a rough sort of mattress on the floor.

Then, suddenly, he knew. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up, struggling on to one elbow.

Farha said, 'You have slept for a long time, lord.'

Parsons gazed at her for a moment, stretched out a hand wonderingly, then lay back exhausted.

'How did I get here?' he whispered. 'I was in the Sands.'

Farha said, 'Yes, you were in the Sands.'

She slipped on to the bed by his side and stroked his head. Veiled as she was, he could not see the expression on her face. Just to lie there and have a woman stroke his head gave him great pleasure at that moment. He dozed off, not hearing her slip away, and when he woke again Farha was standing beside him with a bowl.

'Come,' she said. 'Take this.'

She sat down and held the bowl to his lips.

'Drink,' she commanded. 'Drink, baby.'

It was some kind of thin gruel. He sipped it gratefully, and as he did so his hunger returned, so that he began to wolf the food. It was all gone so soon. He licked his lips.

'More!'

Farha said, 'No. Not now. You shall have more in a little while. To take too much at once is not good for a man when he has been hungry. But there is coffee.'

She poured coffee for him, and drank a cup herself, fetching him a cigarette and lighting it for him. It made him feel dizzy, and his sudden weakness must have shown in his face.

'Baby,' Farha said. 'The big Nazarene is a baby.'

She spoke in a flat tone, and Parsons did not know if she was teasing him or speaking in earnest.

'How did I get here?' Parsons asked.

Farha said, 'Perhaps a djinni brought you here. What do you think?'

'Take off your veil.'

'As my lord commands.'

She took off her veil, and her eyes gleamed at him as she smiled.

'How did I get here?' Parsons repeated.

'On a camel. How else should the great nasrani hunter travel? With his face to the backside of a donkey?'

She kissed his nose.

This was getting nowhere, Parsons thought. He sighed.

'Who brought me back?' he asked. 'The others, they left me, the dogs. They all left me.'

His voice was plaintive, and Farha smiled again. Then Parsons smiled too, vindictively.

'By God!' he exclaimed. 'Just let them wait till I tell Khalid about . . .'

His sentence tailed off. Farha was laughing, rocking with her hands clasped between her thighs. 'What is it? What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' she said, relapsing into giggles. 'It is nothing. I must go now, and you must sleep.'

* * *

Later in the day Farha brought Parsons another bowl of gruel and some tea, and in the evening, after the sunset prayer, she came in with a rather more substantial meal: a bowl of mushy lentil porridge, three flat cakes of bread, and dates. When she had cleared away the remnants of the meal and they had drunk tea, the girl undressed and slipped in beside Parsons, caressing his shoulders.

'Ah,' she said, 'it is good to have you back, my hunter.'
Parsons allowed himself to be lulled into responding to her caresses, nuzzling her neck.

'Agai!' she said.

Drowsily, Parsons said, 'Who brought me back?'

Her lips at his ear, she said, 'It was Talib, of course.'

'Talib! Then where is he now? Why hasn't he been to see me?'

'He cannot. The sheikh is having him punished.'

'Punished? What for? Why is Talib being punished?'

'Why,' she said, 'for bringing you back.'

She smiled at him innocently, her eyes wide and rimmed with kohl like a bride. The fingers of one hand drummed on his cheek, while the other crept over his belly. Parsons sat up suddenly as if spiders were crawling on his flesh. He had turned pale, and cold sweat started out on his brow.

'For b-bringing me back?' he stammered. 'You mean, it was Khalid who . . . ? But why? Why?'

Farha said, 'I think the sheikh does not like you very much, you know. But I like you, don't I?'

Her hand clutched his shoulder, trying to pull him down. He shook it off.

'Why?'

She said, 'Never mind, my hunter. Tomorrow will bring what tomorrow already holds; take pleasure while pleasure is here for the taking.'

'I have to know,' he said, tortured, while the girl

smiled. 'Please. You must tell me.'

Farha said, 'But you will not tell the sheikh if I do. Promise?'

'Of course. Now tell me.'

'You insulted him deeply. I thought what a great man you must be to spit in Khalid's face as you did.'

'I? I insulted Khalid? How could that be? I was most

careful. There must be some mistake.'

'Khalid was proud to bring a great hunter to Ain al Mabsout, and showered gifts on him: a hawk, a slave, a poor unworthy girl'—she giggled, bowing—'and a rifle. And then the sheikh discovered that the hunter was not a hunter, that he did not want to shoot anything, that he was making a joke of the sheikh. So the sheikh told his people to take the Nazarene dog into the desert and lose him, leaving him his gun with one cartridge, for he thought that even a dog of an unbeliever would prefer to die cleanly rather than be dishonoured. But he was wrong. The Nazarene, who did not want to shoot anything, did not want to die either. And so a slave found him and brought him back.'

She rolled out of bed and faced him, and then began to dance as she had on the evening of their first meeting, her whole body vibrating with vitality; she moaned a song with indistinguishable words while Parsons gazed at her at first as though she had suddenly gone mad.

'Stop that!' he said sharply. 'Stop it!'

She stood still, panting, her open lips wet.

'Listen,' Parsons said. 'This is all a misunderstanding, do you hear me? You must tell Khalid that.'

Farha began to dress, saying, 'It is cold.' Then she sat

on the carpet and said, 'It is too late to tell Khalid. You do not understand that among my people it makes no difference whether an act is intentional or not. It is the act which matters, and you have insulted the sheikh.'

Parsons felt a cold prickle of fear at the back of his

neck.

'He has tried to kill me,' he said incredulously. 'What shall I do? Oh, my God, I wish I had never come here.'

Farha looked at him mischievously.

'You must behave as though nothing at all has happened,' she advised him. 'Be bold, be strong. Let the sheikh think that you are ignorant of custom in this matter. Show yourself grateful that you have been rescued.'

Parsons lighted a cigarette and smoked a while with short, nervous puffs.

'Yes,' he said at length. 'Yes, I suppose that would be the best plan.'

'I am sure it would,' said the girl.

Parsons said, 'Come here,' and she rose obediently and went over to him.

He put his arms round her and held her, his head between her breasts. Then he looked up at her.

'I love you,' he said. 'Oh, my dear, what should I have done without you?'

'My hunter,' she said.

* * *

On the following evening Zaid sent for Farha, and they talked together for a long time, laughing and joking. Then Zaid took Farha in to Khalid, and the three held a similarly amusing conversation. When Khalid ordered Zaid to fetch three of his concubines the fat eunuch brought them at a trot, his little eyes shining. He was dismissed immediately, but Farha was commanded to

remain and help to divert the sheikh. It was a signal honour. Khalid smoked tobacco mixed with hemp, and soon he did not know who was who. When he lay snoring at last, his beard matted in sticky spikes, the girls drank sherbet and talked on into the night, their subdued voices rising occasionally into a twittering like the conversation of swallows under the eaves of an English house.

* * *

No one had been to see Parsons all day. During the morning he remained in bed, dozing and recovering his strength. At noon he was hungry and thirsty, so he ventured out of the hut. He stood blinking in a pale sunlight, and wondered what to do. Then he walked to the well and drew water, drinking out of the bucket. Immediately he was surrounded by children, who encircled him at a distance, silently at first, like small wolves waiting for their prey to tire.

'What do you want?' he said petulantly.

'Baksheesh!' they began shouting. 'Baksheesh!'

Parsons said, 'Go away,' as the children began to move round him. He felt uneasy and disturbed.

'Nazarene,' one child yelled. 'It is the dirty Nazarene.'

Once when Parsons was a schoolboy of ten he had gone to spend a holiday with an aunt, who lived in the better suburbs of an industrial town. She had bought him a cricket bat and ball to take back to school with him for the summer term, but Parsons was eager to play with them at once, and so his aunt had given him directions to the nearest park, his uncle having vetoed the use of a cricket ball in the garden on account of the greenhouses and the conservatory. So Parsons made his way to the park, the streets becoming meaner and the houses clustered more closely together as he approached. In the park he played alone, hitting the ball and then running after

it, but it was not much fun. He wished for companionship. Suddenly three boys appeared. They were loutish children, each dressed identically in navy jerseys with red-andwhite check patterns at the neck, dirty grey flannel shorts and plimsolls. The biggest boy said, 'Cricket! Less play wiv yer!' and Parsons was struck with fear. The boy grabbed the bat and made a mock stroke with it, wildly cross-batted; then he began to pick at the rubber handlegrip, tearing it, while his two companions grinned with malice. Parsons stood rooted for a moment, then seized the bat and hit the boy on the head with it, using all his strength. He did not pause to see what damage he had done, but ran panting and sobbing all the way back to his aunt's, imagining himself chased by the boy's friends (who had stood by in amazement at the worm's turning), by the park-keeper, and by the full complement of the city police. His aunt had said, 'Enjoyed yourself, dear? Why, the boy's completely puffed!'

The Arab boys circled round. There were too many of them for Parsons to attempt violence; besides, he was afraid of making a fool of himself. He took out a Maria Theresa dollar and hurled it as far as he could down the street. The children tore after it, screaming and jostling, except for one toddler, who lay where he had fallen in

the dust, kicking his legs and crying.

Parsons went and picked up the child, gazing with revulsion at the snotty nose and dirt-crusted face. The child redoubled its cries with eyes tight shut. Parsons wondered what he should do. The other children were sixty yards away, searching for the coin, quarrelling and shoving one another.

The child stopped crying, and opened its eyes. They were like frosted glass; the child was blind.

Parsons gave an exclamation and put down the child, holding its hand. A woman rushed out of a nearby hut towards them, then stopped short, looking fearfully at Parsons.

He said, 'Is the child yours, mother? The others knocked it over. Come, take it.'

He let go the child's hand and gave it a gentle push towards the woman. She stared at Parsons in terror. She wore a cloth round the lower part of her face: a mere travesty of a veil.

Parsons said, 'Take your child. I would not hurt it.'
One of the others had found the coin and was running away as fast as he could, howling with triumph and trying to outdistance his pursuers. Well, money talked, thought Parsons, and extracted another riyal, pressing it into the palm of the child's hand.

The child took a step away from him and called for its mother. She rushed forward and snatched it up, gazing at the coin and giving a swift glance over her shoulder at Parsons before rushing into her hut. Parsons shrugged and went back to his own quarters. On the way he helped himself to some dates from a pile spread out in front of another hut. No one molested him. The few adults he met walked by with their heads averted, spitting on the ground as he passed, and recalling to him the old man who had spat on the ground before him on his first day at Ain al Mabsout.

Parsons spent the afternoon lying down, smoking and thinking. He began to feel like a trapped animal. He considered going to the fort and demanding an interview with Khalid, but decided against it. If he were refused admission to the fort, he would lose face even more in everybody's eyes. He would wait till Khalid sent for him. He knew that he would have to be extremely tactful in this situation; it had become so unreal to him that he had constantly to remind himself that he was in peril of his life. Khalid had tried to have him killed. He must remember. It took an effort to remember, for Parsons was quite unused to the idea that a man could enjoy unrestrained, personal power of the sort which was Khalid's.

He had known it in theory, but that was different from the possibility of seeing it applied in practice, on himself.

Still no one came to visit him. He wondered where Farha was. Could anything have happened to her? Had Khalid realized that she had been visiting him, and, if so, would he punish her in some mysterious way? Talib was being 'punished,' and Parsons speculated about the form which such punishment might take. Then he shuddered. He had to get out of Ain al Mabsout, but he was dependent in the end on Khalid for help. It was an intolerable position.

Evening came, and then darkness. Parsons lighted the carbide lamp, feeling an aching loneliness. He had been lonely in the desert when the Arabs had left him, but that had been different; he was lonely then because there was nobody else. Now he was lonely in the midst of human beings-alien, it was true, but people none the less.

There was a movement at the entrance, and Parsons jumped up. A woman entered, and he thought it was Farha. Then he saw that it was the mother of the blind child.

She brought a bowl of goats' milk and a cake of bread, setting them down in front of Parsons, moving hastily and unspeaking. Then she hurried to the entrance.

Parsons said, 'Wait, mother.'

She turned and faced him, poised ready to run.

'I must not stay,' she said. 'No one but my husband knows I am here, blessed one, blessed of God. Now let me go.'

'I wanted to thank you for the food,' he said. 'But why do you call me blessed of God?'

She was silent, and Parsons thought of something else. 'Tell me,' he said. 'You remember when I-when the caravan left with me? When we went into the Sands?'

The woman nodded.

'How many days ago was that? I cannot remember.' She considered.

'Twelve,' she said at last. 'It is twelve days, blessed one.'

Parsons calculated, waving the woman away. She went, and he sat on the carpet, shaking his head slowly.

It was Christmas Day.

FARHA came to see him on the following day, bringing food and making no excuse for her absence. He questioned her petulantly while he ate the coarse bread, tearing it with his teeth and mouthing the words as he chewed.

Farha tossed her head.

"Where have you been. What have you been doing? Why didn't you come to see me?" she mocked. 'I was busy. I have many other things to do. Now that I am here you are not pleasant to me. Perhaps I should go.'

Parsons said, 'My love, don't go. I was lonely without you. Every minute is like an hour when you are away,'

The girl smiled, pleased.

'Do you love me very much?'

She pirouetted on one foot, moulding her dress to her body.

'You know I do,' said Parsons. 'I love you more than anyone.'

Farha pouted.

'I do not think you are telling the truth. You are just playing, amusing yourself with me. Admit it!'

Parsons found himself obliged to play this game of avowal in face of Farha's coquetry, swearing that he loved her while she denied that it was possible. But despite his infatuation he could not keep his mind on the girl. He was in no mood for a mock boy-and-girl flirtation, for he wanted to ask Farha about Khalid's plans for him. Still, his rather perfunctory replies and protestations seemed to please the girl, who sat on the bed and made an inviting gesture.

He said, 'It's no use. Not tonight. I want to talk to you.' 'Talk? But we have been talking. We have talked enough for a while. Come!'

She held out her hands. Parsons went over to her and held her wrists, sinking down on his knees beside her and resting his head in her lap. She pinched his ear.

'Farha,' he said. 'The sheikh ...'

"Well?"

'Look,' he said urgently. 'I must get away from here.' Farha said, 'You must steal a car. Yes.' She became excited, adding, 'Take the big car and drive away, away to the sea and your people. And you will take me with you. Oh yes, yes!'

Parsons said, 'That's a marvellous idea, except for one thing. I cannot drive a car.'

'But that is nonsense! Every Nazarene can drive a car.'
'No. Not everybody. That won't do. Tell me, when do you think Khalid will see me? I have to get back to the Coast soon.'

'I hope he will never want to see you. I do not think you understand how dangerous that will be. He may have you killed at once when he has you before his eyes and he remembers how you have insulted him.'

Parsons said, 'I must risk that. At any rate, it might be better than spending my life rotting away in this hut.' Farha leaped to her feet, furious.

'So!' she hissed. 'So you are rotting away here? I come to comfort you, to feed you, to make you happy, and you say you would be better dead. By God, I think perhaps you are right.'

And she stormed out of the hut, leaving Parsons alone to mope disconsolately for the rest of the evening, cursing himself.

Next morning Parsons could stand his hut no longer. He got up at daybreak and walked to the well, washing and drinking there. Women began to arrive near the well, and they paused until he had finished, talking among themselves. Two were holding yellow polythene buckets.

He passed them as he left the well, and one young woman shrank out of his path with exaggerated fear.

'Watch out,' another woman said. 'Get right back out of his way or the dirty Nazarene will ravish you.'

The first girl said, 'He hasn't the strength. Didn't you know?'

An older woman cackled, 'It is the oryx who have the big horns. This Nazarene is a hornless one.'

Parsons walked on, gazing at the ground immediately before him and not daring to lift his head. He licked his lips; they were still cracked and sore. Moving in a blind daze of humiliation, he found himself at the gate of the fort. Impulsively, he knocked loudly.

'Open, you dogs,' he shouted, and continued to hammer at the gate.

Eventually the gate was opened by a ragged guard, his rifle held at the ready.

'What do you want, Nazarene?'

'I wish to talk with the sheikh. Go and send someone to tell him that I am here.'

The guard spat on Parsons' foot.

'May God darken your eyes for disturbing my rest,' he said. 'I will do no such thing. The lord Khalid would beat the soles off my feet. Go away and die, you filth.'

Parsons felt tears of impotent rage start in his eyes, and took a step forward. The guard swung the butt of his rifle, but before the blow could fall a voice came from within the courtyard: a smooth, high-pitched voice, as blank as butter.

'Why, what is this?' the voice said, and the guard lowered his rifle, glancing sheepishly round.

Zaid came to the gate.

'Lord, I regret this most profoundly,' he said, his small eyes gleaming in his black face under his splendid turban, all gold and orange. 'These guards are savage people. It is lucky that I happened to be within earshot. What is the trouble?'

Parsons disliked Zaid at once, but the man had saved him from an awkward situation, and perhaps might be able to help him further.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'My name is Zaid. I—I serve in the sheikh's house-hold,' Zaid said importantly, without specifying the nature of his duties, and realizing that the occasion held some possibilities for sport.

'Can you help me to see the sheikh?'

'It is possible,' the eunuch said. 'Yes, it is possible that I may be able to help you see the sheikh. If not today, then perhaps tomorrow, or the next day. It is as God wills.'

He stood there, smiling broadly, while Parsons shifted from foot to foot. The guard, who had recovered his composure, leaned in the gateway and began to smoke, looking at Parsons with insolent contempt.

'Come,' said Zaid. 'Let us see what can be done.'

He led the way into the fort, his gait as smooth as his voice, Parsons walking behind him through the inner courtyards and along the gloomy corridors until they halted in a small room deep inside the fort.

'If you will be pleased to wait here, lord.'

Zaid bowed with exaggerated respect and walked backwards from the room; then Parsons heard the rasp and slam of the bolt as Zaid shut him in.

Parsons waited patiently for perhaps half an hour, then banged on the door, shouting. No one came. In an ante-room to the women's quarters Zaid lounged on cushions and ate sticky cakes, drank two cups of sweet tea, and fell into a doze, his lips curved in a gentle smile. After an hour Parsons sat on the floor of the bare

room and beat it with his fists. In an hour and a half Zaid came back.

The bolt screeched, and Parsons, who had been pacing the floor, swung round and faced the door, white with anger.

'Lord, lord,' the eunuch said, 'I am so sorry to have kept you waiting.'

'Why did you shut me in here?'

'It was not my choice, lord. It is a rule. We are not far from the women's quarters, and the sheikh has decreed that all unbelievers are to be secured while they await audience.'

'Well,' said Parsons. 'What happened? Can I see Khalid?'

Zaid shrugged, his shoulders high and his hands spread. With infinite suavity he regretted that try as he might he could not obtain an audience that day for Parsons. It was most unfortunate, but the sheikh was in *majlis*. Zaid suggested that Parsons should try again the next day.

So the boss was in conference, thought Parsons bitterly. It all sounded like the brush-off given in the business world. Concealing his frustration as best he could, he thanked Zaid for trying.

'I will come again tomorrow,' he said.

'Yes, lord. I will leave orders at the gate that you are to be admitted when you ask for me. And now I expect that you will be tired . . . ?'

Parsons realized that Zaid was dismissing him, but knew that it would be useless to protest. He was hungry and thirsty, but could not bring himself to ask for refreshment. He would debase himself no further. Superficially anyway, he told himself, he had lost no face by asking an audience of Khalid. Anyone would have to do that if he were not specifically invited. But he knew very well that in the ordinary course of events he would at least have been given a cup of coffee as a token of Khalid's

hospitality. Oh well, he thought, why worry? He followed Zaid's broad and flabby back.

He realized that they were taking a different route out of the fort, but attached no significance to this until they emerged on to a sort of rampart of roughly crenellated mud bricks overlooking the desert at one side and a small courtyard at the other. Zaid paused, puffing as though in need of a rest, and Parsons leaned idly on the inner parapet and looked down with curiosity. Then he gasped.

'What is it, lord?' asked Zaid. 'Are you unwell?'

He moved solicitously to Parsons' side, and followed Parsons' outstretched hand with his eyes.

'Oh, that,' he said. 'A slave under correction.'

It was Talib. The Arab sat cross-legged in a shaft of watery sunshine on the beaten dusty earth, his head sunk between his knees in an attitude of resigned despair. Round his waist was a broad leather belt, and a long, thin chain stretched away from him. The other end of the chain was attached to the collar of a lion.

Parsons exclaimed and called Talib's name. At the sound of his voice Talib made no movement; but the lion, which had been lying on its side, got up and moved towards the part of the wall where Parsons and Zaid leaned over. It snarled and struck the air with its paw towards them; with its movement Talib was pulled over. He stood up, utter weariness in his motions, and shambled nearer to the lion until the chain was slack. Then, as the lion paced about below the two watchers, Talib was compelled to move with it, stumbling and sobbing, paying no attention to the two men on the wall. Parsons called again, but Talib did not look up; exhausted though he was, he kept all his attention on the lion and his task of making sure that the chain did not impede the movements of the beast.

Parsons realized that their presence was exciting the lion, and he pulled Zaid away from the wall.

'God,' he said. 'Oh God, what can we do?' Zaid smiled.

'There is nothing to do. The slave is punished by the sheikh's command. He is lasting quite splendidly. The lion at present is well fed, and all the man has to do is to refrain from annoying it. He is doing excellently: I think, though, that he is becoming tired. Soon the sheikh will order that the lion be fed no longer. You understand? I come every day to see how things are progressing. It is very interesting.'

Parsons swallowed.

'But that is Talib,' he said. 'Talib is my slave.'

'He is still subject to the sheikh, and the sheikh can punish him.' Zaid paused, and then added maliciously, 'Just as he can punish anyone who commits a crime where the sheikh's writ runs. The hand of his displeasure can be very heavy.'

Parsons knew that it would be stupid to antagonize Zaid. Somehow he must effect Talib's release, but to rage at Zaid would accomplish nothing or even make things worse. Yet he could not stifle all protest.

'A lion,' he said. 'Barbarous. It is barbarous to treat the man like that.'

Zaid said, 'It is an old Ethiopian custom, and the credit of acquainting the sheikh with it is mine.'

He spoke shortly, and Parsons took the hint, saying no more. They left the battlements and returned to the main gate, where Parsons replied automatically to Zaid's farewells, their mockery barely concealed, and went back to his hut. He lay on the bed in turmoil of mind, scarcely capable of thought. A muscle in his cheek had begun to twitch, and would not stop, and there was a sick pain in his stomach. He sat up, drumming his fingers on his knees, biting his lower lip and screwing up his cheek in a vain attempt to control the tic. At length, seeking relief in mere activity, he took off the Arab garments and dressed in his

European clothes, not realizing that he was making the only protest open to him.

A sound at the entrance to the hut made him turn. It was the mother of the blind boy. She brought dates wrapped in leaves and a small bowl of goats' milk.

'Eat and drink, blessed of God,' she said as she placed the food before him and hesitated, torn between fear and curiosity, looking at Parsons' twitching cheek.

'Blessed of God? You called me that the last time you came. Why?'

She coughed nervously, head bent.

'Come, you know I mean you no harm. Tell me.'

Between the afflicted and the afflicted there is a bond,' she said. 'My son is blind by the will of God. You helped him, and you gave him a whole riyal. We are humble people. Now my husband says that we must feed you, for it is good to do this. Plainly, though you are an unbeliever, the hand of God has touched you and made you mad, for who but the blessed of God would give a whole riyal to a blind child?'

11

FARHA did not visit him that night. Parsons was greatly disappointed, for he wanted someone to talk to. He waited for perhaps an hour with his eyes open, staring into the darkness, the twitch in his cheek gradually subsiding, his thoughts shifting from Farha to Talib, and then to the oryx. The vision of the creature as he had last seen it in flight away from him somehow disturbed him even more than his knowledge of Talib's suffering. He passed into a fantasy in which he was standing in the desert, and the oryx approached him delicately and without hesitation, and nuzzled his arm. It knew how much he needed it, and allowed him to caress its soft neck which could arch so proudly. He experienced an anguish of desire that this might be so, but the make-believe faded and then turned into longing for Farha: a longing to be comforted by her. In the absence of that comfort he found himself almost taking pleasure in self-pity, but his reverie was interrupted by incongruous memories of his exploits with the girl. He thrust them out of his mind, stifling a rising lust which was so out of place as to shock him profoundly. Perhaps he really was mad, he thought fleetingly. He had been mad to entrust himself to Khalid, that much was certain. And yet he knew that his dissatisfaction with the world of the oil camp and all it stood for was rightly based, and so was his concern for the oryx. He had reacted by trying to explore the world of the Arab, and it had rejected him. Where had he gone wrong? He told himself that he had rested true to his principles; but the fact remained that he was in a desperate predicament surpassed only by that of Talib, for whom he was directly

responsible. He shied away from the conclusion to which he was leading, and tried to fix his mind on the oryx, but finally fell asleep thinking of Danvers and Marietta.

* * *

In the afternoon of the next day Farha was leaning over the parapet watching Talib and the lion. Both were asleep: the lion on its side with its black mane in the dust and its legs outstretched, the forelegs lightly crossed and the belly distended with meat; Talib lay at the furthest distance of the chin, prone, his head resting in the crook of an elbow. The little courtyard was littered with bones, and one of these lay at Talib's side; he had been gnawing at the fragments of rotting meat which adhered to it. In the opposite wall of the courtyard was a gate with a rough wooden latch. The gate was unbolted and unguarded, the presence of the lion making precautions of that sort unnecessary.

Farha picked up a loose stone and threw it at the lion. The stone struck the ground, raising a puff of dust, and then rebounded into the soft flesh of the lion's belly. In one liquid movement the lion was on its feet snarling, its tail lashing. Talib opened his eyes dazedly as the lion bounded towards the wall; the suddenly tightened chain yanked him over, and Farha heard his gasp as the breath was driven out of his body. Then he was being dragged over the ground. The lion pawed upwards at Farha, who laughed and spat down into its face, between the golden eyes as it stared at her with wrinkled nose and lips drawn back from its yellow teeth.

'What are you doing?'

Zaid had appeared behind the girl. He looked down over her shoulder, the musky female scent of her filling him with a faint disgust.

'Amusing yourself?' he asked.

'Is it forbidden?' she murmured, her attention on Talib,

who had got to his feet, blood welling from a cut on his cheek. The lion snarled upwards once more, then turned and stalked obliquely away. It halted, and looked at Talib, who stood motionless, his hand at his cheek. Then the lion moved past him, and began to pace back and forth below the wall.

Zaid said, 'I thought it was going to take him then. Come now, the sheikh wants you.'

Farha shrugged.

'It is a good thing my father and brothers are dead, and my uncles are in Abu Dhabi. This would not have pleased them.'

'You please the sheikh,' the eunuch said softly, 'and he can please you by granting you the favour you ask. Come, let me hear no more of this. God knows you are accustomed to spreading your legs, and the sheikh is a man of power.'

Farha glanced down at Talib.

'It is not much of a favour,' she said. Then she turned from the wall and giggled. 'A man of power. Yes, the sheikh is a man of great power.'

* * *

When Parsons came to the gate and asked for Zaid the guard threw back his head and laughed, which mystified Parsons. But the guard opened the gate wide and invited Parsons inside with a fulsomely ironic gesture.

'Enter, lord,' he said. 'You are not much like those who usually seek Zaid, but there may be hidden resemblances which an ignorant man like myself cannot discern.'

A group of Arabs collected round Parsons. The guard spoke to one of them, who went off to fetch Zaid. The others scrutinized Parsons with mock solemnity.

'He is flat-chested,' one said, gripping the front of Parsons' shirt.

Parsons jerked away from the man's grasp.

The guard said, 'Yes, but he is coy. You can see that at least. And he is blushing.'

Another man put in, 'He wears trousers, too.'

The first man said, 'And he cannot shoot.'

Parsons said, 'Is this the way to treat a guest? What does all this mean?'

The guard said, 'Let us see you walk.'

He prodded Parsons in the rear with the butt of his rifle, forcing him into motion. Ashamed, frightened, Parsons took a few steps.

'There is something in the walk,' the guard said judiciously. 'Yes, there is something. It isn't much of a bottom, though. Now answer me a riddle, brothers. What can it be—even though it is flat-chested and thin-arsed—which is coy, blushes, wears trousers, cannot shoot, and seeks Zaid?'

The others laughed and shouted, "Tell us! Tell us!' The guard said, 'You give up, then?'

'Yes, yes, we give up. Tell us!'

The guard said, 'I have given the matter much thought, and there seems to me only one possible answer. It is a woman.'

The men shouted, 'By God, yes! You are right, it is a woman!'

Parsons' fear turned to rage. White-lipped, his voice high, he said, 'You sons of dogs! Wait till the sheikh hears about this!'

The guard said, "The lord Khalid spits upon you every day, nasrani woman, and you wallow in the filth of your shame. What sort of a man can you be when you seek an audience of the sheikh through the eunuch who looks after the women's quarters?"

Parsons took a step towards the guard, his cheek twitching.

He said slowly, 'Do you mean that Zaid . . . ?'

'You did not know? the guard asked incredulously, and then laughed. 'The sheikh is tasting a little of his revenge already, then. Yes, Zaid is the harem eunuch. How they must laugh at you, nasrani!'

Someone began to giggle, but the sound ceased abruptly as the man saw Parsons' face. Convulsed with anger, he yelled, 'Somebody lend me a gun!' He realized that in Khalid's eyes and those of his people he had lost all honour. Then he fell silent, shocked. In the brief moment of his fury he had been thinking like an Arab, obsessed with the problem of having lost face. He felt trapped in a whirlpool which was sucking away into its vortex the last remaining strands of his European individuality, and his mood of rage was succeeded by one of weariness. so that when Zaid appeared with the news that Parsons could see the sheikh he merely nodded his head as though he had expected that outcome all along. He left the group of contemptuous Arabs without a backward glance and trudged after the eunuch, thinking of how best to handle the interview with Khalid.

Zaid took him into an ante-room which Parsons had never previously visited. It was bare except for a carpeted floor and dais. They seated themselves, and Zaid called a slave, who brought coffee and cakes. Parsons ate and drank mechanically, trying to think clearly but finding himself overcome by inertia. What did it all matter? he thought. Khalid could do one of three things: let him go, keep him prisoner, or have him killed. It was unlikely that he would be released to take back reports of his treatment to the Coast, though Parsons knew that even should he succeed in obtaining release, people would either refuse to believe his story or, believing it, would be able to do nothing about it. Danvers had warned him of Khalid's power. If Khalid decided to keep him prisoner, sooner or later someone would start looking for him. His leave was due to expire on 16th January. What day was it? He calculated, and decided that it was the 28th December. A week's overstay of his leave would have to be allowed before anyone became concerned about him. That

meant that he would have to remain alive for the best part of a month. Parsons could not see that happening. And so only one possibility was left. He sighed, and asked the eunuch for a cigarette, having smoked all his own; then he blew smoke at the ceiling, watching the little cloud drift along in a slight current of air and vanish through a grille in the far wall.

Zaid said, 'Well?'

'Well what?'

Parsons thought, He's stalling me again; this is getting monotonous.

Zaid shrugged.

'You wished to see the sheikh?'

Parsons said sarcastically, 'Why, is he under the carpet or something?'

Zaid gestured towards the grille, and said, 'I will wait outside, up the flight of steps at the opposite end of the corridor along which we came.'

Mystified, Parsons approached the grille as Zaid went out. Perhaps he was expected to talk to Khalid through the bars, like a prisoner being visited. The grille was only about two feet wide and a foot deep, being made of ornamental ironwork. Parsons looked through, puzzled.

There was a large room, richly carpeted and hung with luxurious rugs. Fuel glowed in a brazier in the centre of the room. Behind it was an enormous divan-dais, at the side of which were brass and copper basins and ewers which sent warm glinting reflections from the fire in the half-light of the chamber. Khalid was lying on his back on the divan, the naked figure of a woman sprawled across him. Parsons gave an involuntary exclamation, and at the sound the woman rolled over and sat up, rubbing her eyes. It was Farha. Parsons screamed and tugged at the grille with both hands; it held firm and he let go, then rushed sobbing from the room and along the corridor, taking the stairs in a couple of leaps.

He found himself on the rampart. Zaid was standing there looking at the lion and at Talib; the lion lay below the wall, dozing, while Talib sat and watched it with patient fortitude.

As Parsons appeared at the top of the steps Zaid turned and said, 'Well, I told you that you could see the sheikh---' his voice turning to a cry as Parsons launched himself forward. His outstretched hands drove into the flabby chest of the eunuch, high up, and the man screeched as he toppled over the wall, falling on to the lion. Parsons lay for a moment across the parapet, panting as a terrible noise arose beneath him; then he ran some way along the parapet, let himself down by his hands, and dropped to the ground, landing awkwardly. A sharp pain stabbed between his legs. Ignoring it, he ran to Talib, who was jerking at the end of the chain. Something heavy hit Parsons on the left leg as he worked swiftly at the task of unfastening the broad belt round Talib's waist, laughing as he did so. The object dropped to the ground as Parsons stumbled under the impact. It was one of Zaid's sandals, flung there by a stroke of the lion's paw.

Talib was free, and he stood unmoving, saying nothing, until Parsons took him by the arm and shoved him towards the gate, lifting the heavy latch. People were calling from the building; their voices sounded unreal and far off in Parsons' ears. A bullet flicked over his shoulder and he heard its sudden breath with detached unconcern: it struck the wall by the door jamb and whined off into the twilight sky. No more shots came. The Arabs on the rampart stood irresolutely, waiting for orders, and the few men who came running up to the gate paused in fear of the lion, for Parsons had left the gate open behind him. Then at sight of Parsons' face they drew back, the rumours of the nasrani's madness confirmed for them then and there. The men ran round to the front of the fort. As Parsons and Talib walked forward, the lion appeared in the

gateway, its face a blood-soaked mask about the mouth and jowls; it sat down in the opening and began to wash, while panic ran through the settlement, Khalid was dressing and cursing, and Parsons walked steadily with Talib and talked earnestly to him in English, of which Talib understood not a word. Parsons' voice was intense and serious, but he was reciting obscenities about Farha and Khalid and Zaid in the tones of a don expatiating on an important academic point. Suddenly he paused, rubbing between his legs at another twinge occasioned by the drop from the wall.

'That's where they get you,' he said in surprise.

Talib waited until Parsons was ready to move again, and took him into a hut, talking rapidly to an Arab who squatted inside drinking coffee. The man answered briefly, and went out in haste, while Talib said to Parsons, 'That is my brother,' and lay full length on the floor, resting.

The Arabic fell on Parsons' ears apparently unheeded, but when he next spoke it was in that language.

He sat down by Talib, his cheek twitching and a halfsmile on his face.

'We will go soon, and find the oryx?' he asked, like a child asking for a treat.

'With God,' said Talib. 'I have great need of it.'

'Yes,' said Parsons. 'We will go and find the oryx, and do what should have been done before, and I will cleanse my mind of that bitch with a sight of something pure and beautiful and faithful to itself.'

'Lord?'

Talib propped himself on an elbow and glanced up at Parsons without comprehension. His brother returned with a rifle and bandolier slung over his shoulder; he was carrying a full water skin and a leather bag. Talib embraced his brother and took the things from him.

'Come,' he said to Parsons.'We must go quickly. To-

night my brother will drive a herd of goats over our tracks.'

Parsons said slowly, looking round him, 'Have I been ill? What am I doing here?'

'No, lord. Not ill. The hand of God has touched you lightly, and we are going now to find an oryx.'

THE party went with a swing. Marietta danced till her feet began to ache, and when it was near midnight she was claimed by Danvers. He was merry but not drunk. They found Jones, and the three of them joined the throng on the dance floor, crossing their linked hands and singing Auld Lang Syne. The balloons bobbed from the ceiling among the incongruous, unmoving propeller blades of the fans; the walls were decorated with imported holly, and sprigs of mistletoe hung down from the roof. The singing died away, and people slapped each other on the back, shook hands, and shouted.

'Happy New Year!' Jones said, and kissed Marietta on the cheek.

'Happy New Year!' said Danvers, and kissed her closed lips, then murmured, 'Later?' in her ear.

She shook her head.

'Joe,' she said to Jones. 'When are you going back?'
Jones said, 'Termorra, honey. We're mighty close to
oil there. Whatsa matter, you want I should see you
home?'

Danvers said, 'See here-'

'No, it's not that.... Joe, let me know if you hear any news of John out there, will you?'

'Yeah, sure thing. You're worried about that guy, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Marietta. 'I am.'

* * *

Jones took an excruciating hangover back with him to Oil Rig 3, groaning intermittently as he drove the

Land Rover and imperfections in the road surface sent needles of pain through his eyeballs. A gang of workers were dismantling the derrick at Number 2 Rig, before erecting the 'Christmas tree' which would feed oil into the pipeline; Jones did not stop, but glanced sourly at the busy men and drove on.

Arrived at Oil Rig 3, he went straight to the site office, sat at his folding table, and clutched his throbbing head. Looking up from time to time, he saw his men working on the derrick, Heinecke among them. He ought to go out and supervise progress, and intended to do so in a little while.

Rafferty knocked and came in.

'Hi,' he said. 'You look a bit rough, boss.'

'I feel it,' Jones said shortly. 'How's she coming?'
He got up and poured drinks, straight whisky for himself and beer for Rafferty.

'If them geologist boys are right, we should be pretty damn close to it by now.'

Rafferty talked, while Jones gave only half an ear to him, until he said something which made Jones start.

'Whatsat?'

Rafferty said, 'You know, that half-soaked teacher. Some of our wogs was hunting, and they met him about fifty miles up the blue from here.'

'What, alone?'

'Nah,' said Rafferty. 'There was some bloke with him. A bloody wog... Christ, what's that?'

Jones, looking through the window, heard the roar, saw the derrick buckle sideways, half-obscured by the spouting black column, saw men falling; then watched agonized as the black column exploded into flame.

'We got a gusher,' he said bitterly. 'I oughta shoot my goddam self. Come on!'

They ran out towards the plume of flame which split the evening sky, oil and fire falling around them, but there was little to be done until they could get help. The blazing gusher would have to be 'blown out' with high explosives, a task calling for skill which Jones did not possess. All they could do was administer first aid to the wounded, and collect the dead. They found Heinecke's burned and broken body sixty feet from the base of the derrick.

* * *

Parsons and Talib walked for most of the first night after their escape from Ain al Mabsout. Parsons became semi-conscious with weariness, but Talib, who should have been in an even worse condition following his sufferings with the lion, appeared to have gained a second reserve of strength, striding tirelessly on and having to halt every so often for Parsons to catch up with him. Two hours before dawn they stopped for rest, and Parsons curled up shivering in the sand. Talib covered him with their only blanket, lay down, shivering himself, and slept while a wolf howled at intervals until dawn.

In the morning Talib woke Parsons and gave him water.

'Drink,' he said. 'We must move on. It is still not safe to make fire. At noon we should be able to have some coffee if God wills it.'

They walked on again. The sand was beautiful. Parsons felt somewhat light-headed, but managed to maintain a fairly steady pace. They were not in the high dunes, and though the going was difficult, it was possible to move with a certain rhythm. The predominant colour of the sand was a deep orange with an underlying pale fawn, churned up by their footsteps, so that Parsons, walking behind Talib, saw the man's tracks appear with a miraculous distinctness as though his feet were painting the sand as he walked. At noon they halted. Both men set themselves to gathering fuel from a scanty growth of

dead salt bushes. Talib tore strips from his already ragged clothing, struck sparks from a tinder-box, and made a fire. He brewed coffee and baked bread, and Parsons ate with immense gratitude.

'Where are we heading?' he asked Talib.

'This evening or early tomorrow we shall leave the Sands and move on to the gravel,' the slave said. He gestured with his hand, making a half-circle through west to the north-east. 'God willing, we may find trace of oryx then.' He sighed, and added, 'In the time of my grandfather there were great herds of oryx on the gravel desert; now there are scarcely any of the animals to be seen on the gravel. They come down out of the Sands from time to time. By God, life is hard these days!'

Parsons said, 'There are so few left because you have shot most of them.'

'That is as God wills it.'

'But soon there will be no oryx left at all,' Parsons protested.

'That would be a difficult thing to bear,' Talib said unemotionally. 'But with God's help we shall find one at least.'

'Why do you kill so many oryx?' Parsons asked.

Talib smiled bitterly.

'It is the horns,' he said. 'They make a man strong with women. I have great need of an oryx.'

Talib's statement intrigued Parsons, but he forebore tactfully from asking further questions.

They pressed on for the rest of that day, without however reaching the gravel. There was little wind at first, but a breeze began to blow from the north-east at evening, and Parsons burrowed into the sand that night in a vain attempt to keep warm. At least they were able to have a fire, though there was insufficient fuel to keep it burning all night: Parsons wriggled his feet under the sand until they were close to the warm embers.

He drowsed, opening his eyes from time to time and gazing at the enormous profusion of the stars. He knew now finally that he was quite unfitted for the task he had set himself. He had been a conceited fool to think that he could do anything for the oryx by himself. Thinking over the stupidities he had committed, he writhed under his blanket. His only asset had been his facility with languages, and his good command of Arabic was not enough. The only way to save the oryx from extinction would be to capture as many specimens as possible, induce them to breed in captivity, and, perhaps a couple of generations hence, release them in a favourable habitat. And this was a task for entire expeditions, not for one man. He sighed, brought finally up against his own incapacity. But there remained the personal value of the oryx to himself. He had to see it once again: that was imperative. And after that, he did not much care what happened to him, he told himself. Then he thought of Farha, and turned his face from the stars in agony, burying his head in his elbow.

They reached the gravel in the middle of the next morning, and Talib seemed cheered by the sight of it, for he began to sing in a low voice. Parsons felt disturbed by the huge flat sweep of the country, and almost wanted to double back again into the shelter of the Sands. They moved northwards, and at the noon halt for coffee and food Talib suddenly gripped his rifle and stood up.

'There are men coming,' he said. 'From the Sands. Keep down.'

He called out in a loud voice. Parsons, crouching behind Talib, saw a man's head appear, and heard his voice faintly. He was perhaps three hundred yards away to the west, and had been concealed in the sand. He stood up, holding his rifle, and was joined by two more men who materialized at his side.

'I think it is all right,' Talib said. 'But stay down in case they try an attack.'

The men approached warily, and halted some distance away, exchanging greetings and asking the news.

Talib said, 'They are *bedu* working at the—the—where the Nazarenes look for oil. You can stand up now: it is quite safe.'

The men vanished momentarily, and then reappeared leading camels. One of them milked his beast into a bowl, standing on one leg and balancing the bowl on the knee of the other while he coaxed the camel to let down her milk. Then he offered the bowl to Talib and Parsons. Parsons drank some of the warm milk with a murmur of thanks; when Talib had finished the rest he blessed the camel which had provided it. Then he made coffee for the newcomers, and started to bake more bread. The unexpected guests would make heavy depletions of their small supplies, and this worried Parsons: Talib unconcernedly used almost all their remaining flour and water.

Their guests questioned Talib closely. He and the nasrani were hunting oryx, he told them, but had had no luck. He admitted that they came from Ain al Mabsout, for there seemed little point in concealing the fact. They gossiped for an hour, and then the three men rose, followed by Talib and Parsons. They made their farewells and rode off back into the Sands, where they talked quietly while the two foot-travellers broke camp and started to move north. Then they separated, one man riding south to Ain al Mabsout, while the remaining pair returned to the oil-rig, keeping to the sand until they had far outdistanced Parsons and Talib. It was an off-chance, but their suspicions had been roused, and it might be that the Sheikh Khalid would reward them.

* * *

Khalid heard the man expressionlessly, asked a few questions, and sent him away with fifty riyals. He sat alone

in thought for a while, his beard sunk on his chest and his snowy head-dress concealing his face. Then he sent for Farha, who knelt at his feet. He grasped her by the hair with one hand, and drew his heavy dagger with the other.

'Zaid. . . .' he said softly. 'Did Zaid tell you that the Nazarene would observe us together?'

'No, lord,' the girl faltered. 'I swear it on the head of the Prophet. Zaid had been making game of the man, but he did not tell me that he planned to—to—.'

Her voice broke off as Khalid released her, and she sank back into a squatting position, her eyes fearful.

Khalid said, 'If I thought that you had plotted with Zaid to bring such shame upon me... Truly, a man can trust a eunuch even less than he can trust a woman. It is a good thing for Zaid that he died as he did: the death I should have chosen for him would have taken a great deal longer. There remains the question of this nasrani and the slave.'

He sheathed his dagger and said viciously, 'Oil! The Nazarenes buy us with oil. I would like to drown every one of them in oil.'

'Yes, lord,' said Farha submissively.

'They come here with their womanish ways, deceiving and lying, and they steal the oil and corrupt our men while they do it. I must be a simpleton.'

Khalid was working himself into a rage. Farha laid a hand on his knee in a tentative caress, thinking to calm him, and he slapped her face so that she fell sideways and watched him silently, a red weal showing on the brown skin of her cheek. Then, stirred to anger herself by this treatment, she sat up and rubbed her cheek.

'Yet those two have escaped you,' she said spitefully. Khalid suddenly regained his tranquillity, much to Farha's surprise, for she had realized the unwisdom of her taunt and was awaiting a reprisal.

He said, 'You are only a stupid girl. So you think they have escaped me? Well, prepare for a journey tomorrow. You like riding in a car, I think?'

He laughed jovially, but would say no more in spite of all Farha's blandishments.

AFTER their three guests had gone Talib and Parsons turned north and walked for perhaps three hours. There was no exact division between the sand desert and the gravel; outcrops of gypsum ran into the sand, and sand drifted in great tongues across the loose stones. The wind blew strongly on their right cheeks, making Talib's rags flap about his body.

'We must find a well,' he said at length. 'Our water is almost finished. We shall have to go back into the Sands'

Parsons did not demur; he followed Talib obediently as the man turned north-west. By evening they were in the Sands again; they camped, and pushed on all next day, bearing northward again. Talib moved with complete assurance, and Parsons experienced none of the terror of his previous spell in the desert; the presence of one other person, even a person as alien as Talib, gave him a sense of perfect security. Being with one Arab, he decided, was better than being with a crowd of them. In a crowd they had shut him out so that he had been virtually alone. But Talib's companionship was ideal, and he warmed to the man during their journey, forgetting that Talib was supposed to be his slave and abandoning the false thinking that had characterized his previous relations with Talib. The Arab shot a hare in the early afternoon, killing it with a lucky snap-snot as the animal broke away across Parsons' front.

'That was a good shot, by God!' said Parsons, who subscribed to the popular view that all Arabs were poor marksmen.

'It was,' said Talib simply, and added: 'I had to fire right across your belly a finger's breadth away. We need meat.'

For a moment Parsons was shocked, but then he began to laugh. Talib joined in, and Parsons had a sudden sense of communion with his companion which satisfied him profoundly. He thought, If I had met Talib at the beginning, instead of Khalid, things might have been different.

They came to the well in the late afternoon. Parsons had expected to see something more spectacular than the clogged damp hole in the sand which the well proved to be. He helped Talib to clear the opening and dig down to the water, which collected muddily at the bottom of the hole. After an hour's hard work they managed to clear sufficient space to fill the water skin. Parsons tasted the water and found it brackish, almost unpalatable, and still full of minute sand grains.

The hare was delicious, in contrast to the water. It had been the custom in Parsons' family to hang hares until they were high indeed. This meat, however, tasted like roast domestic goose. Parsons was replete as he drank his coffee, feeling only the lack of a cigarette to round off the meal. There had been no trace of a twitch in his cheek all day, and he felt surprisingly fit.

'When do you think we may find an oryx?' he asked Talib.

'Tomorrow, God willing. See.'

Talib led Parsons away from the disturbed ground near the well. A line of tracks, pale against the orange sand, led away to the north-east.

Smiling, Talib said, 'There is our oryx. It was at the well when it scented us or heard us: I do not know which.'

'But the wind will cover the tracks! Let us go after it now.'

Talib pointed to the darkening eastern sky.

'It is too late,' he said. 'Come, we have eaten well, and

it would be foolish to go rushing after the oryx now. I will find it tomorrow, never fear.'

At sunset Talib prayed, after performing the ritual ablutions at the well. It was the first time he had prayed during their journey together, and for the first time, too, Parsons had the sense of being excluded by the Islamic ritual from the full measure of companionship which he had been enjoying.

Religions, he thought jealously. They were like clubs. If you belonged to the club, everything was plain sailing; if you didn't, the people in the club-Islam, Christianitymade you feel shut out. The Christians knew they were right, and the Muslims knew they were right. So where were you? The old stone church which Parsons had been forced to attend regularly during his childhood still stood in the village in which it had stood for a thousand years. A thousand years of bigotry and superstition, Parsons thought. A thousand years of religious warfare and murder and intolerance in the name of God, and before that almost another thousand years of it elsewhere before that church had been built. And Talib was the same. To Talib, he was a nasrani, a Nazarene, and ultimately an object of hatred and contempt, though Talib had no idea where Nazareth was and even less idea than Parsons himself what it stood for.

He realized suddenly that he was envious of Talib. It was evident that the man was sincere and not just going through the motions of prayer as Parsons had gone through the motions so many hundreds of times before the days at his university when he had abandoned the pretence. Talib needed his faith; and, though Parsons could not see why, he felt the rancid curd of his own jealousy sour his mind. Yet it seemed that Talib needed his faith just as others needed theirs presumably: perhaps because it supplied some lack in themselves. But what about himself? He frowned. He needed to see an oryx.

He belched, the aftertaste of the hare in his mouth,

and answered Talib shortly when the slave came over and sat by him, having finished his prayers. But in a little while he found it impossible to maintain his surly mood, and the two men chatted quietly.

Parsons said, 'Tomorrow is the start of the New Year among my people. Today is New Year's Eve.'

'Truly?' said Talib politely.

They talked until it was quite dark, and the fire had dwindled to a red glow; then they lay down to sleep, Parsons thinking briefly of first-footing and Auld Lang Syne and New Year resolutions. And, finally, he wondered whether, by the end of the year to come, there would be any oryx left in the world.

THE wind blew steadily the next morning. Parsons was very cold, but found that he could endure the discomfort simply by ignoring it as he walked with Talib, keeping a little behind him as the Arab cast round for tracks. The wind had smoothed out those of the previous day, but Talib was unperturbed. They halted in mid-morning for coffee and bread.

'Talib,' Parsons said as he munched the meagre ration, 'why did you never try to escape from the lion?'

'It was useless. Am I a fool to go against the will of God?'

'Yet you came with me when I let you go. Was that also the will of God? I mean, Khalid gave you to me. I felt that I had to do something to rescue you.'

'Khalid gave you a lot more than me,' Talib said cryptically, and added: 'Your question is a difficult one. Assuredly, the hand of God was on you. I can say no more than that.'

Parsons said, eagerly, 'And now you are with me as a friend?'

Talib rose and scattered the fire.

'Come,' he said, 'we waste time.'

He moved off rapidly, and Parsons had to trot to catch him. With a sick anguish he persisted with his question.

'Talib,' he said. 'Talib, wait.'

The Arab turned and said, 'There is no answer, and you know it, nasrani, except that Khalid gave me to you. I think you would have done better to worry about the hawk which he also gave, and about which you have never seen fit to ask at all. The hawk is with my brother.

Do you think you will ever claim it? Men have been killed for hawks like Lila.'

'The hawk is unimportant to me,' Parsons said. 'You are important.'

Talib said coldly, 'Do not deceive yourself. I am of no importance to you whatever. What is important to you? Not the hawk, which you have neglected; nor the rifle, which you destroyed by your foolishness. And the woman?' His nostrils tightened. He said with finality, 'The woman can have been of no importance either. Why could you not have had the grace to die?'

Parsons stared at Talib, open-mouthed with astonishment.

'What?'

The Arab said, 'This is stupid talk. Look. There are the tracks of the oryx. Now we will hunt, and stop talking; though I shall never understand why you, with all your woman's talk about not shooting oryx, should want to come with me and watch me shoot one.'

Parsons stopped dead in his tracks, stunned. Talib went forward cautiously, ignoring him, scrutinizing the general direction of the tracks, becoming absorbed in the job on hand to such an extent that he seemed to have forgotten Parsons' existence.

'Wait!' Parsons shouted.

'Be quiet!' Talib said, turning.

Parsons caught up with Talib. He was breathing heavily, his face white.

'You must not shoot the oryx,' he said, trying to keep calm. 'You must not shoot the oryx!'

Talib said fiercely, 'I must.'

'I shall prevent you. I warn you.'

The tribesman raised his rifle until it touched Parsons' chest, thumbing off the safety catch. Then he lowered the rifle again. He drank from the water skin, and then handed it to Parsons.

'Take that, and go,' he said quietly. 'God's hand has

touched you and I cannot bring myself to kill you, despite all that you have done to me. Now in the name of God leave me!'

His lean face was distorted with passion as he stared at Parsons, who swallowed miserably but stood his ground. Talib swung away at a fast pace, and Parsons watched him go. My God, he thought: all that I have done to him! My God, and I rescued him from certain death, and that's how he pays me back. These bloody, bloody people! And then he suddenly thought of the woman he had rescued from drowning. He had been rowing idly on the Trent, not far from Newark where he was spending the week-end with friends. He had heard a confused splashing round a bend in the river. It was unpolluted in that reach, and at first he had thought that an angler had hooked a particularly large pike. He had rowed faster in the hope that he might be of assistance. However, it had been a fat woman threshing about in the water. He had moored the boat hastily, then jumped off the stern, hanging on to it with one hand and grasping the woman's clothing with the other, tugging her into the steep bank. Somehow he had got her ashore and pumped the water out of her as she had retched and puked. The first thing she had said to him, as people collected round and an officious man in a cloth cap shouted, 'Ere now, give 'er air, give 'er air!' had been, 'You bloody young fool. What did you want to go and do that for?'

Parsons spat on the sand, and followed Talib at a distance, dropping the water skin and leaving it. The Arab did not look back, but Parsons did not try to come right up with him; he kept well to the rear and to the left.

Talib tracked the oryx out of the sand on to the gravel. It was upwind of him, and he saw it clearly a quarter of a mile away, a white shape against the dark surface of the gravel. Talib trotted eastward unhurriedly, leaving the

tracks and working in a wide curve. The oryx saw him and paused, watching the man go away from it. It snorted and tossed its white head with a scything motion of the horns, then turned towards the Arab's retreating back. Parsons observed with bewilderment Talib's strange behaviour from where he crouched in the sand. A little to the north, higher dunes encroached on the gravel, their steeper sides facing north-east.

The oryx took a few paces in Talib's direction, then paused a moment, stiff-legged. It pawed the ground indecisively. Talib lay down unmoving. The oryx waited, watching the man, who was now perhaps six hundred yards to the east, while to the north the crescent of dunes ran outwards, the sand no longer orange, but a warm red sand-stone. Reassured, the oryx turned away and began to browse on a patch of herbage, while Talib, his rifle beneath him, began to turn so slowly that Parsons did not even realize the man was moving at all until he had completed half the turn. The oryx looked up, and Talib froze, moving again when the animal resumed its browsing. He was now directly facing the oryx.

He's too far away to risk a shot, Parsons thought. Talib's rifle was an old .303 Ross, its barrel loose in the stock, and Parsons would not have relied on its accuracy beyond two hundred and fifty yards in its present state.

Talib began to inch forward and northward, and his strategy suddenly became clear to Parsons. At the back of his mind, while watching Talib, he had been cursing his own folly in having believed that an Arab could have imagined doing anything with an oryx except shooting it. And then he suddenly realized that he himself was being made an accomplice in the hunt. The oryx drifted westward imperceptibly, keeping approximately the same distance from Talib; Parsons could not decide whether the animal was aware that it was being stalked, but the effect

was the same: it was being gradually placed in a position where sand lay northward and westward, while Talib himself was to the east. Parsons, though crouching, had made no special effort at concealment. Even now the oryx was probably conscious of his presence, and this acted as a deterrent to its further southward progress.

The man's using me as a beater, Parsons thought with utter outrage. And I thought he was my friend.

For a moment he continued to watch. Talib was moving westward now rather faster than the oryx until perhaps four hundred yards separated them. Slowly, slowly, he began to raise his rifle. Parsons had assumed that Talib had been working into a position in which he could make a clean kill; but as he saw the Arab bring up his gun he understood that Talib must merely be counting on hitting the oryx somewhere in the body; thereafter he would follow the blood spoor and wear the animal down until it died of its wound and exhaustion or he could take further shots at it.

Parsons stood up and shouted.

The oryx gave a great leap in the air, facing Parsons momentarily as it landed; then it bounded towards the sand. Talib rolled round and saw Parsons, who watched the rifle come up again, his consciousness dulled into slow-motion. With an effort he flung himself sideways, and the bullet sighed past his ear, the report reaching him as he lay for a second with his face in the sand.

Parsons wriggled down into shelter, and then moved forward again cautiously. Talib was running westward, crouching low, and the oryx was nowhere to be seen. Parsons hesitated, and then began to move north, trying to keep out of sight. The red sand of the surface, disturbed, revealed a pale cream below, and in due course Parsons came on Talib's tracks and those of the oryx. He halted, breathing heavily, and considered what to do.

Khalid told the driver of the Land Rover to halt, and scanned the gravel desert with his binoculars. Farha sat next to him, heavily veiled, and six of Khalid's retainers occupied the seats in the back of the vehicle. All were armed.

Farha said impatiently, 'Can you see anything, lord?' 'Nothing....'

Khalid was about to lower the binoculars when his attention sharpened. He had seen the oryx. He focused on the animal, two miles away, saw its sudden leap without knowing what caused it, and then picked up Talib's movement in the foreground of his field of vision as the slave slewed round and aimed at Parsons. Khalid was puzzled, not knowing what Talib had been firing at, for though he swung round in the direction of Talib's aim, he could see nothing, Parsons having dived out of sight at the shot. A raiding party, perhaps?

The sound of Talib's shot came faintly to his ears.

'Quiet!' he commanded, and the party waited, listening. No answering shots were heard. For a time Khalid stood statuesquely, the breeze stirring his head-dress and the hairs of his beard; then he ordered the driver to move forward slowly.

* * *

The oryx was a young bull which had been driven from the herd during the previous breeding season by a bull older and heavier than itself. A harem of its own had proved impossible to find, and in consequence it was in excellent condition: nervous but tetchy and full of energy and aggression. Its instinctive flight was accelerated by the sound of Talib's shot at Parsons, but after running for three-quarters of a mile into the sand desert, it paused and turned, listening, flanks heaving slightly and nose and ears twitching as it sounded the air. Then it began to

move back along its own tracks, ears held forward and head high. It stopped to stale at the point where Talib's tracks diverged from its own.

* * *

Talib followed the trail for just about a quarter of a mile, then left it and cut northwards, risking the oryx's picking up his scent. He ascended a dune, wildly churning up the creamy undersurface, and sat at the top, panting with the effort. He remained there only a moment, for he glimpsed the oryx fleetingly as it backtracked. Inevitably, it would soon scent him. His heart was beating as it always did when he was hunting. The thought of Parsons crossed his mind briefly, but he dismissed it. The nasrani would be too scared to show his face until the hunt was done. He moved backwards in the direction of the gravel.

The wind blew more strongly, whistling over interstices in the gravel and producing strange organ-notes of sound which pulsated below the tremolo howl and drowned the noise of the Land Rover as it advanced in low gear. Khalid was watching Parsons work his way northward, and the sight gave him considerable amusement.

Even in the cold wind, which whipped plumes of sand from the dune-tops, Parsons was sweating. Each time he reached the crest of a dune, he had to pause on the far side, peer over through the blown sand while keeping as much as he could out of his eyes, and throw himself over the crest out of sight down the other side. He was an inexperienced stalker, but could scarcely have chosen a better method of getting close to Talib.

Khalid shoved the driver's foot out of the way brusquely, put his own on the clutch and engaged neutral gear; the Land Rover rolled to a halt one hundred yards from Talib's back. Talib was squatting just below the dune's crest, on the north-easterly face; Parsons had vanished from view, hidden by the nearer dunes as he lay in the trough on the leeward side of Talib's dune.

The oryx paused, sniffing as it breasted the southward crest unseen by Parsons, whose attention was on the crest of the dune beyond which Talib lay. The oryx moved quickly down the steep face, its haunches bent, and continued up Talib's dune, sixty or seventy yards northwest of Talib, and seen simultaneously by the slave and Khalid as it reached the top. Parsons struggled up the dune towards Talib, while Khalid signalled his driver to move closer and picked up a Thomson sub-machine-gun, snapping the magazine in place and, setting the action at automatic. He cocked the action and waited, standing with the gun resting on the windshield.

Talib stood up, and Parsons saw him above, ghostly through the wreaths of blown sand.

'Stop!' he shouted. 'Talib!'

The Arab swung his rifle towards Parsons, then changed his mind rapidly and took a snap-shot at the oryx. He missed, and worked the bolt frantically. The oryx put its head down, the slim sharp horns like twin rapiers straight in front of it, and charged Talib.

In the same moment as Parsons was fighting his way to the top of the dune still shouting, Khalid raised the tommy-gun. The burst of fire traversed impartially through Talib and the oryx, flinging the Arab against the charging animal and the oryx in its turn against Parsons' shoulder. Men and beast rolled to the bottom of the dune.

Khalid emptied the magazine. Of all weapons he liked the tommy-gun best, particularly on account of the roar the big .45 cartridges made in his own ears. When his gun-deafness had passed off a little, he left the Land Rover, permitting Farha to accompany him but signing to his men to remain where they were.

Parsons opened his eyes. He had been stunned by the impact of the oryx, but now he worked his way under

its haunches, its blood staining his clothing, and saw Talib. The Arab was sitting bemusedly on the other side of the oryx, and through the ragged clothing Parsons saw the holes punched in his body. Talib coughed blood, and tried to crawl to where his rifle lay a few paces away. Then he fell down and rolled over on his back. Parsons limped over to him, and he looked up at Parsons with recognition but no hatred.

'Talib . . .' Parsons said.

Talib said, 'I would have killed it that first time. I am a good shot.'

He turned his head and looked past Parsons at the slaughtered oryx, blood welling now from the wounds and from his mouth, beginning to drown him. The wind dropped.

Khalid stood there with Farha, who tore off her veil and started to shout at Talib, ignoring Parsons completely.

'Useless!' she cried. 'Useless! If my family had been here you would have been made to divorce me. See what you have brought on yourself. You could not even shoot an oryx, you impotent, useless husband!'

She spat out the last word, flung herself down by the side of Talib, and began to stuff sand into his mouth and nose, while Khalid watched with interest.

Parsons staggered forward.

'Husband?' he started to say, then stopped, aghast at Farha's action.

'Stop,' he said. 'The man is dead.' He swallowed, swayed, not only with weariness but with the knowledge in him, and said, 'He is dead. I am glad. The oryx was to have been for you.'

He looked at Khalid.

'Kill me,' he said. 'In the name of God I ask this.'

Khalid said, 'You are not worth the price of a bullet or the lifting of my dagger.'

He spat at Parsons' feet and turned, calling the girl.

Farha laughed as she passed Parsons. The two went to the car. Khalid left the oryx because it was unclean, not being *halal*; and he did not need the horns.

* * *

He followed the Land Rover a while with his eyes, then had to turn as it changed course: he looked after it unmoving as it dwindled and disappeared. The sky over the dunes was crimson and rose-red and gold, then duckegg blue, tinting the grey northern bastions of cloud with pink and silver. Away to the eastward the gravel desert darkened under the wide sky, and soon the cold twilight was about him while he shivered like a man in fever. He bent and touched the tribesman's cheek briefly, then turned to the oryx, placing a hand on one of the horns. To his wonderment the white hide glowed suddenly; the glazed eyes gleamed red, while his own shadow leaped out of him on to the ground. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a great pillar of flame far to the north.

He hesitated between the dead man and the dead animal, as though considering whether he should try to carry either or both. But it was no use, even if he had been strong enough. He was no hunter bringing home a trophy of horns, no mourner bringing home a corpse. A fleeting memory passed through his mind; a memory of a child in England, trudging from an autumn spinney with a bag of dead pigeons while his father walked before him with the gun.

He shook his head slowly and moved away, humping in the end only the dead-weight burden of his own self, towards the flame in the sky.

Author's Postscript

All the incidents, places, and characters in this story are fictitious, with the exception of the Empty Quarter and the Arabian oryx. But for those who like to know the basis of fact—however terrible it may be—in their fiction, I quote from an article which appeared in the London edition of The Guardian (3rd January, 1962) when this novel was in process of revision. The material is reproduced by kind permission of the Editor, and it can speak for itself without further comment.

ARABS SHOOT 16 ORYX

Massacre in the Empty Quarter

A party of Arab hunters using tommy-guns has massacred 16 oryx, one of the world's rarest animals. News of the raid has reached the headquarters of the Fauna Preservation Society in London and brought immediate reaction yesterday. . . .

... There were only about 40 oryx in the world before this

raid. . . .

Oryx are a large type of antelope with two long, imposing horns. When attacked they will charge head down. To the Arabs they are a symbol of virility. At one time Arabs would hunt and slay the oryx with spears, then return to their villages to boast about their braveness and virility.

Mowed Down

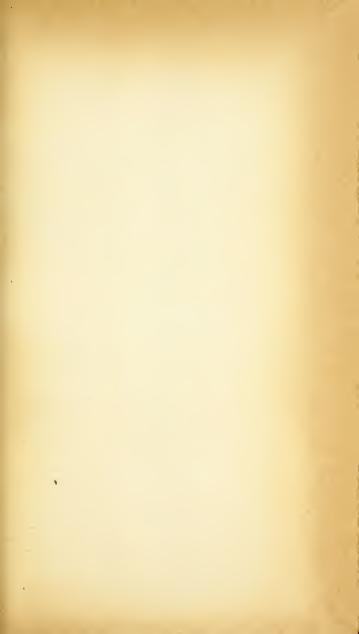
A spokesman for the society, which is trying to protect the

world's rarest animals, said:

'This party drove in Land Rovers 400 miles across the Empty Quarter, some of the most desolate desert of the world, where only the tough oryx can live. . . . When they found one, they fired a burst from their tommy-guns. The oryx then charged the hunters, who never once left their vehicles. Then they mowed down the animals with tommy-gun fire. . . .'

The oryx is among the top three animals on the Survival Service Commission's list for preservation. There is one oryx in

Britain, at London Zoo.



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